

Chapter Seven

The Ball

It was common ground amongst all who were privileged to receive invitations, and it should be recorded that there was not a single declination amongst them, that the Ball that Earl Mottram held in honour of his nieces and the wife of his long deceased brother was the grandest and the most memorable in the County that decade. Indeed, it was still being talked of well into the next, but in a different context and in much subdued tones. Those who were not privileged to receive invitations but considered that they should have, and as is the nature of such things, they greatly exceeded the attendees, were aggrieved and sourly said amongst themselves that it was as it should be and the Earl was only compensating for the many years during which the ballroom at Hazleton Court had stood empty and unused. By their calculations and an assumption that the quality of Balls was inversely proportional to the quantity of those which were held, this one should be the grandest yet and it was another example of the Earl's dereliction of duty if it transpired that it were not. When they heard that it was the grandest, they said this only served to demonstrate the truth of their theories which made it seem to the impartial observers that the Earl played no part in the success of his occasion; it was all due to mathematics and Fate.

Victoria had no doubt that the Ball should be the grandest ever and monitored the workmen as the ballroom was brought into what Mr Twigg described as an "acceptable condition". Ruth said it was fortunate that the deterioration was only paint and gilt deep, and a blessing that the roof had not fallen in as a result of the non-use, but for her the Ball served only as a weapon with which to gently tease her sister. She had no qualms about telling Victoria that as neither of them had been to a Ball of this standing, they would have no measure by which to judge its success or failure. Her sister's response was to declare that providing her card was full and oversubscribed, and providing every man that she danced with was handsome and dashing and a decent cut above the best that Sutton Minety could produce, for her the Ball would be a success no matter what was the opinion of others.

As they engrossed themselves in their preparations, neither of the sisters would have known, or even suspected, that they would have been the subject of conversation between two men who met, one evening, only two days before the night of the Ball, in the Monmouth Arms, a ramshackle Inn on the outskirts of Malmesbury.

"Is it true, then?" said the one who was seated first.

"Of course it is true," said Roger, standing over him. "Every word of it. That miserable, old, skinflint, has cut me out of his Will! Cut me out completely, I dare say! Can you imagine it? I am disinherited at a stroke of the pen!"

"But can you be certain? I mean, I know what is being said around, but this is different."

"Of course I can be certain! I am as certain of this as I am of anything." He sat down and looked around him before leaning forward. "I have a copy of the previous Will which is in my favour but precious little that will afford me now. So when I heard of what was said to have happened I went to see that vile creature Lancaster. He is in league with them, I tell you! Oh, yes, he says proudly, the Earl had made a new Will and the old one, the one on which we were reliant, is rescinded and null and void. Where do I stand in the new one, I asks. Am I to have a copy as I have of the one in which I am the principle beneficiary? To the first question he says it is not within his power to tell me, and to the second he answers, no! I am cut out I thinks. Why else does he not let have a copy or know the particulars of this new Will which that miserable old fool has made? I ask the question again and he says that he cannot tell me. I can see the answer in the self-satisfaction in his eyes. Well, I will outsmart them all and have my revenge on them in time, all of them."

“We cannot just go on as before?”

“Of course we cannot! As soon as anyone approached my uncle he would denounce us. No, our collateral has been usurped but I plan to get it back as well as be avenged.”

“You are certain of the contents of the new Will?”

“I am as certain as I can be. As luck would have it, when Lancaster was there and setting down the particulars of this new document my uncle he had asked for Lucy to take them a tray of tea and she entered upon them whilst they were discussing the subject. She heard very clearly how his money is to be dispensed. To his daughter!”

“His daughter!” hissed the other man. “Are you sure?”

“Yes! She hears Lancaster asking my wretched uncle to confirm that he wanted the beneficiary to be his natural daughter. Those were the very words he used - his natural daughter!”

“So it is true,” said his companion. “The rumours that were circulating and which Ruth did not deny with any conviction. Indeed, she all but confirmed them. Victoria is the Earl’s natural daughter! But can you be certain of this maid, Lucy?”

“I am as certain of Lucy as I am of anyone or anything. I have that serving wench exactly where I want her. And in this particular she would have made no mistake as to what was said and has every reason for remembering the exact words that were used. What is more, I have no difficulty in keeping Lucy’s silence. It is not in our interests, mutual or individual, that this matter should become public knowledge. I have made her understand that it is not in her interest to divulge what she knows.”

“So Victoria is to inherit the Earl’s fortune. We are finished once that is known!”

“Yes,” said Roger, “sweet, pretty, little Victoria is an heiress though I have reason to believe that she has no knowledge of this nor shall have from our lips. And I feel devilishly bad about it. The way the two of them went about wheedling their wares, making eyes, winning him over. I should have shot them both in the wood when I had the chance, except I did not have a pistol with me!”

“You saw them? Rather, they saw you? I had no knowledge that they had seen you.”

“There! Your influence over cousin Ruth is not as strong as you think it is.”

“I wish to have no influence over her. But have they made the connection?”

“I would not have thought so. Victoria would not in any case. Ruth, well she is the clever one, the plotter.”

“I suppose she is.”

“I don’t think they have, but they have hauled us up, haven’t they, good and fair! Well, I am not finished yet! You mark just what I say. I am not going to be put aside like that!”

“But what can we do?”

“Well, a first thing might be to track down this new Will and destroy it! I can then produce mine when the reading is to take place and it will not be contested as there will be nothing to contest it with!”

“Surely this solicitor, Lancaster, will have a copy tucked away somewhere?”

“I think not. That is where my little Lucy has played her part again. Lancaster visited my uncle again the day before yesterday. He brought with him some deeds and left, she says, without them. One of those deeds was the Will. My uncle has it still.”

“So, it was made two days ago? Who witnessed it?”

“That would be Twigg. He does that sort of thing, but there’s no reason why he should have a copy, nor why he might be privy to the contents. No, my uncle has it somewhere in his sitting room and only he, Lancaster, Lucy, you and I in the World knows what it says.”

“I bow to your admirable intelligence, but how can you be sure?”

“Well, take one Earl who has a family name to protect but who has at least one family skeleton locked away in the cupboard in his sitting room. That Earl would not be too eager to bring that skeleton out into the open simply by virtue of the contents of his Will which is a document that need not be public until he is deceased. And we must keep his secret for the

present. The time will come when it will be in our interests to have it revealed, but my uncle will be less than concerned when that day comes.”

“I understand you up to a point, but the destruction of the Will will afford us nothing if the Earl is able to make a new one.”

“Whereas I would be pleased to know of its location, I have no intention of destroying it whilst my uncle is still alive, which may not be for long given the parlous state of his health. And I think that I need to take out an insurance policy first of all.”

“Surely the Earl may live for a score years or more?”

“Probably he would if left to his own natural way,” said Roger. “But we need to emulate your good father and his treatment of your mother.”

“Stepmother,” corrected his companion.

“Stepmother. Can you procure something that will bring about a long, lingering, painful death, something that is easily administered and not easily detected? As for the duration I have in mind a number of months. Nothing too quick, mark you.”

“I suppose so, but is such a course wise? Who is going to administer it? I see no sense in putting the old man down simply out of revenge. There too many un-necessary risks and we could end up simply making your cousin the richest woman in the realm if the Will is not found and destroyed.”

“I have thought of that too, and that is the insurance. But first things first. Lucy will administer it.”

“Lucy?”

“Pray keep your voice down,” Roger hissed, looking around the room. “We are not known here but it would be unwise to take the risk, as you put it, of attracting attention such as that someone might remember our presence and finger one of us. Lucy will administer the substance. Coupled with the details of the new Will I have given her such reason as she would wish to be revenged herself on my uncle and on my cousins. She has easy access to his food and drink. She has every opportunity, but can you procure it?”

“Yes. But what about the risk of it being discovered after his death?”

“We must make it look as if it is the poison from his wound that has brought about his end. Perhaps we could give Lucy some ointment that she could rub into the wound and this aggravate it? It would be to our advantage if my uncle was taken to his bed and never left it again of his own volition. He is less likely to interfere in my plans if he is confined to his chamber. Something unpleasant that displaces his food, perhaps? Anything that will make him suffer on account of his action.”

“I will see what can be done. The more that is administered, of course, the greater the risk of detection. And we have the time you seek, do we?”

“Angelo tells me that we probably have until the Spring. He is due to sail early in the New Year and will not return until late April at the earliest. We may get a call then, but it will be for less than the full amount. I may be hard pressed to keep the London establishment running that long, but that is in part where the insurance comes in. It depends a little on how things develop. You are sure that you cannot squeeze any more out of your father?”

“I am certain. I am liable now for a pretty penny as it is.”

“I do not see why your father is so miserly. He would find common ground with my uncle.”

“He is a Scot. What excuse can you give for your uncle?”

“None,” said Roger. “There was a time when I considered that we might have to treat them the same.”

“What, poison my father?”

“Well, you have to bring something to this partnership other than brains. But for the present the possibility of such a call on you has passed as I propose other steps.”

“Other steps? What else can you do? And what is this insurance you talk of?”

“I shall marry her.”

“Marry her? Who? Lucy?”

“No, Victoria, of course. That is my insurance and that I must do before the contents of this new Will become known. That is why we need some time.”

“Will she have you?”

“Of course she will have me!” he said, grinning and leaning back in the chair. “She absolutely dotes on me. But I will make certain of it at the Ball. I will monopolise her so that no-one else has an opportunity to become a rival. Then I will just be a little distant for a few days, perhaps a week or so, just to let her come to maturity. Then I will ride over to my darling and pick the fruit as ready for picking it will be!”

“And your uncle? What will be his position in this?”

“Oh, there is no doubt that he will oppose it, but I am trusting on Victoria to have her way. I am sure that she will prevail, indeed I am banking on it and on the fact that although he may be suspicious, he will not be able to divulge the favoured position he has placed her in. Of course, I shall not know either, shall I? I will just be a young suitor, overwhelmed with love and admiration for my cousin, and who would not be? Victoria will prevail, I am sure of it.”

“But marriage? That is a rather serious step is it not?”

“It is, except I have no intention of remaining married. As soon as I can secure that which I have been dispossessed but which is rightly mine, I will be rid of her. Until then it may help our cause to have a pretty young wife established in the London house. It never surprises me what a pretty face and a trim figure can do to influence some men’s decisions. She could have her uses and I will ensure that she is put to them.”

“Well, it is better that it is Victoria and not her sister. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to marry Ruth even if she were an heiress.”

“Ah, yes, Ruth. I gather that Angelo is not in agreement with you in that respect. However, fortunately, as you say, there is no need to take such a strong a medicine. But I wish I could in some way remove Victoria from her influence, or reduce that influence. Ruth could present us with difficulties and I have not yet found a way of separating them. Perhaps an opportunity will present itself.”

“So long as I am not asked to marry her. Providing poison is one thing. Marrying Ruth would be another!”

“No,” laughed Roger. “It is I who will make the sacrifice. I will marry Victoria and have her sign over to me what ever my uncle in his generosity gives her as a dowry together with any other possessions. Once he is laid to rest, when the Will is read I will already have her inheritance secure. If I am able to find and destroy the Will then I will present mine to Lancaster and take great delight in him realising that I have out foxed him. Either way we are secure.”

Of course, in the matter of Balls and in judging their relative merits, both Ruth and her sister were innocents. For Ruth, indeed, it sufficed to see that the quality and quantity of those attending were enough to satisfy any desire or hope that her sister might have harboured. She kept her word to her uncle, went, and was considered elegant if at times a little sombre. However, it was the necklace that attracted greater attention than did the wearer and comment from those who recognised its significance. Ruth might have felt unease had she known what was being said in this respect, but she was quite happy to tell her sister that everyone was talking about *her*, marvelling at her beauty and gaiety. Some of the young men thought Ruth aloof, and said so amongst themselves in an un-gentlemanly way but, to their great frustration, they found Victoria unapproachable and unattainable as it appeared that Roger de Malle Mottram had a complete monopoly, a discovery that prompted further un-gentlemanly comment. And for the handful of dances when she was not with him, swirling, twirling, or tripping lightly across the floor to the acclaim of the many admirers she had won that night, she was to be found behind her fan, declaring that she was taking such refreshment as this particular dance would allow. “I could not possibly dance every dance,” she told the youngest son of a Duke. “I would have no strength left in me for later and I am determined to dance until the dawn. I will look to you to use your influence to have me invited to further Balls!”

The onlookers were divided into those who had something to say about this young belle, and those who were there to listen. “It is said,” said Lady Netley in a low voice to the

small gathering of acolytes who relied upon her for the gossip that they would carry to the four corners of the County, "and I have no reason to doubt this, that the child is the Earl's."

"Oh, gracious," said Lady Swaythling, and fluttered her fan furiously.

"I can recall," continued Lady Netley, "that the late Lady Mottram was at pains to clean up some kind of affair and that would be a full twenty years since if my memory serves me correctly."

"And the other one, the plain girl?" said Lady Totton.

"Oh, yes. What a dull child she is. So plainly not the daughter of an Earl. That is his niece and she has the privilege of sharing the same mother as the Earl's daughter."

"How scandalous that they should appear in public like this!" said Lady Swaythling. "I am sure that I would not wish either of my daughters to be aware of the connection."

"Ah," said Lady Netley. "It is also said that the Earl is anxious to restore his daughter's position in Society."

"How could he possibly do that?" said Lady Swaythling. "Society would never tolerate it. She would be hounded out of every salon in the County."

"So she might be, but if she were married to her cousin and he is the next in line, would she then not be received as Lady Mottram?"

"So that is the purpose of this Ball?" said Lady Totton. "To, in effect, bring his daughter out and announce her engagement to the young man with whom she is for ever dancing?"

"Indeed," said Lady Netley. "I have heard on good authority that Earl Mottram has named young Roger as his successor as he could not hope to name his natural daughter. Uniting the two of them is the next best thing. There is one unexplained mystery, though and that is the fact that our plain Jane is sporting the Mottram necklace. One can only conclude that it has been loaned to her for the evening in consolation and, possibly, as a diversion. I have little doubt that the Earl, who can be as cunning as the days are long, would conclude that there would be many amongst those invited who would be aware of what the necklace traditionally symbolises."

"Unless he is bent on breaking with tradition," said Lady Totton. "We live in a most peculiar age."

"There's the mother now," interrupted Lady Netley. "Sat talking to the niece. It is said that her father had a legal practice in Tetbury which handled the Earl's father's estate. That is how she came to be known to the present Earl. And her brother still handles the family's affairs. He is also expected here tonight."

"Indeed?" said Lady Swaythling. "I trust that he will not present himself to us. I cannot abide common legal men."

As this little gathering sat and studied Mrs Mottram, she looked back with a mixture of pleasure and alarm. "It is clear that she will dance with no-one but him," she whispered to Ruth who had made her way around the perimeter of the room, nodding to a remarkable number of people she did not know and whose name she had not caught. "And it also appears that you dance with no-one."

"I have been asked, Mother," said Ruth, "but I have declined on the grounds that I would not wish to be the cause of disappointment and I am sure that there is no shortage of young ladies this evening."

"Nor young gentlemen," said Mrs Mottram. "Yet she dances only with him. Not that I have any real objection as he appears to be a pleasant enough young man."

"Nor would I wish to be a source of embarrassment to Victoria," continued Ruth, thinking that she might have been prepared to have her card marked had the doctor's son been there. "She is so accomplished whereas I, well, let us say it is one of the talents I have yet to develop."

"It is what people will say about it," said her mother. Ruth did not answer. She found it hard to form a balanced opinion of her distant cousin. There were occasions when she thought him unfeeling and arrogant and possible unprincipled, but then he would perform some act which would restore him to favour in her eyes. And save for the occasion when they

had first arrived, he had always acted most courteously towards her, her mother and her sister. "Where is it likely to lead?" added Mrs Mottram.

"Lead, Mother?" Ruth at this point was making a similar kind of calculation to that described by Lady Netley on the other side of the ballroom, and arriving at much the same answer.

"Yes," said Mrs Mottram, turning and looking up at her daughter. "What do you think his intentions are concerning Victoria? Has she conveyed anything to you?"

"No. Should she?" Mrs Mottram sighed but before she could take the point further she saw her brother approaching across the room, which was the signal for Lady Swaythling to rise and go in search of a sanctuary.

"I am sorry that I was not able to be here earlier," said Mr Lancaster. "I had to go to London to attend to the Earl's business and there was some problem with the steam railway which delayed my return. It appears from what I can see that the evening is a great success. But, then, I can see a number of people who I would rather avoid and some who would probably rather avoid me. I note Lady Swaythling slipping away which is as well as she is a detestable woman. And I am pleased to see you are wearing the necklace, Ruth. You look, shall I say, most elegant."

"If that is the truth of it, Uncle, then I have succeeded in every respect!"

"Mmmm," said Mr Lancaster. "The Earl has instructed me to draw up a deed of assignment in your favour."

"With which I am in total discord," said her mother, sharply, "but it appears that neither of your uncles pay any heed to my views."

"I simply follow the Earl's instructions," said Mr Lancaster. "The Mottram necklace has not appeared in public for many years but, Ruth, do you realise that there are some here who will be aware of its significance?"

"I do not think there is any requirement, Henry, to bother Ruth with ancient family legends," said Mrs Mottram. "I doubt that my brother-in-law had any significance in mind when he decided, against my wishes I repeat, that Ruth should have the necklace."

"Significance?" asked Ruth. "What significance? Uncle mentioned no significance other than that it is a family heirloom which passes down the female line."

"There!" said her mother forcibly.

"What significance?" repeated Ruth. "I think I ought to know if it has a curse or something like that."

"It does not have a curse," said Mrs Mottram. "Nevertheless, I am sure that you should not accept it. You should advise her against it, Henry. You really should!"

"Ruth is not my client and I am not in the practice of giving gratuitous advice, even to my niece. In any case, if she were my client I would have to declare a conflict of interest, acting as I do for the other party. No, Ruth, there is no harm in it, if my sister will excuse me for saying that."

"She will not!"

"As the Earl says, the tradition says that it must be passed on to someone. The problem the Earl faces is that the family line is weak."

"But I am not a direct blood relative," said Ruth. It was a barbed comment, she knew, and she saw the exchange of looks that passed between her mother and uncle. But she could not declare that there *was* a blood relative there, on the dance floor, right before them. She had no doubt now why the Earl proposed to pass the necklace to her. It was a means of diverting attention away from the truth.

"That in itself is not significant. By tradition it passes to the nearest female relative upon the death of the current holder, whether the connection is by blood or marriage. The late Lady Mottram was the last holder and you, Ruth, being the elder of the Earl's nieces are the nearest female relative. It passes to you by tradition and by right. And by tradition, you should accept it until it comes your turn to pass it on."

"Are you saying that my uncle was not bestowing anything upon me when he gave the necklace into my keeping, but that he was simply observing a family tradition?" asked Ruth, quite ungraciously.

“You might think that,” said the lawyer, “and I cannot answer for what was in the Earl’s mind when he decided that the necklace should be passed on, and to you. But I think he could possibly have waited until Roger de Malle Mottram, who I note is dancing with your sister, even as I speak, married. I would not like to express an opinion as to who would, by tradition, have the greater claim, you or his future wife. It is now academic as the Earl has acted. And, if I might say this also, there is more than symbolism in this gift. The Earl has decided that you are an appropriate recipient and has indicated to the World at large that if he were to die intestate, the whole estate should pass to you.”

“Goodness!” said Mrs Mottram.

“I hasten to add,” said Mr Lancaster, “and I would say not one word of this to you Ruth if I thought for one moment that your judgement would be affected by it, that the Earl has made a Will and that in my view he is unlikely to repudiate it, so there is little chance of him dying intestate. But the gesture has been made nonetheless. You have been greatly honoured, Ruth, and that is a gift that money cannot buy.”

Oh, dear!” said Ruth, trying to grasp the implications of everything her uncle had said. “Perhaps I had better read Bleak House next!”

Mr Lancaster smiled, but her mother looked vexed and uncomfortable. “I doubt that it will come to that, and I would remind you that the lawyers profited greatly, but now I should go and pay my respect to the Earl. Here is Victoria, but where is he?”

“He has withdrawn for a short rest,” said Ruth. “He did promise to return. Perhaps I should go and attend upon him and ensure that all is well.”

“Oh, Ruth,” said Victoria between short breaths, “you are for ever going to see Uncle, seeing him and reading to him. I do not see why half of it is necessary. You shall stay here. Cousin Roger has gone to fetch punch for us all.”

“I agree,” said Mrs Mottram. “I would like you to sit here, Ruth, and keep me company for a change. I feel quite out of place and not at all at ease amongst all these fine ladies and gentlemen. Why, one of them even asked me if I danced. Why, no, I declared. That is for the young folk. Then he had the impudence to infer that I was still of tender years. I never heard of such a thing! And I feel that they all know who I am but I know of them not one. So, if you are not to dance as you say, you shall stay here and talk to me.”

“And I will quickly assist your cousin in his mission and procure a glass of punch for my own refreshment,” said Mr Lancaster. “Then I must seek out the Earl and complete today’s business if he still is of a mind to do so.”

It was but a few minutes later when Victoria was clutching her skirt as she was whisked away and they were left alone. “I knew it was wrong for you to have the necklace and a compounding of errors to wear it tonight,” hissed Mrs Mottram.

“In neither particular had I the choice,” said Ruth.

“You could have refused! You could simply have declined what was asked of you! He has no authority over you, Ruth! But see now what you have done! Everyone here will be talking of it!”

“Talking of what, Mother? You heard what uncle said - there will be some. He did not say everyone. By all accounts the necklace has not been out of its box for years. How many will recognise it, and what are they to make of it, those who do?”

“But everyone will be talking about you! It is not good to have people talking about you whether it is in front of you as now or behind your back. I do not like it at all!”

“Oh,” said Ruth with exasperation, “if everyone is talking about anyone it is about Victoria, not me.”

“About Victoria?” said Mrs Mottram with concern. “Why are they talking about Victoria? What are they saying?”

“They are, no doubt, saying how fine and beautiful she is,” said Ruth having little doubt about what was being said and thinking that her mother would be scandalised if she overheard it. “They are probably saying how scandalous it is that she dances but no-one other than her cousin for as far as I can see, they have danced together all night.”

“So she has,” said Mrs Mottram. “Why, I made that very point to you not half an hour since, but that is different. It is all mere tittle-tattle.”

“I see,” said Ruth, trying to isolate the difference. For a moment she re-examined what Mr Lancaster had said to see if it shone a new light on the matter of her sister and her uncle, but decided he was probably right. Perhaps the Earl had a number of motives in mind when he chose her for the necklace, but at the heart of it was the family tradition and that he followed. She tried to resolve not to make any more of it than that, but could not suppress a growing conviction that there was more to it, possibly matters that she was completely unaware of. An example was that she had never considered the contents of the Earl’s Will beyond being told that Roger was the main beneficiary. Perhaps his nieces would enjoy some small bequest, but it was equally possible that she was not mentioned. She could see a strong reason why Victoria might be favoured, but her line of thought took her no further than that. No, this was a dead end and it would be many years in any case before they knew the provisions of the Will. It was even possible that once they returned to Meadowview Cottage, the Earl would cease to communicate with them!

It was in that moment that Ruth came face to face with the realisation that their future lay back in Sutton Minety, not there in Hazleton Court Hall. As she looked at the lights, the gaiety, and listened to the music, talk and laughter, she realised that this was all alien to her and that she felt, and was, apart from it. Although she enjoyed reading to her uncle, the privilege of sitting alone and undisturbed in the library, and walking in the gardens, it was all an extended holiday, a fantasy that could not last and must be brought to an end. These, here, were not her class of people anymore than this was her life or this place her true home. “I think we should go home, Mother,” she said suddenly. “The Ball shall be our swan-song. We should return to our little cottage just as soon as it can be arranged.”

“Ruth, dearest,” said her Mother. “You never said anything truer or wiser in your life. Those are my thoughts just as if you had plucked them from my head. Even so, I fear we may be too late.” She could not speak the whole of her mind and confess to her daughter that in what ever else they might have achieved during their stay, she had failed totally in the one thing that had brought them to Hazleton Court Hall in the first place. Ruth’s future position was still not resolved!

“Too late?” said Ruth, trying to locate her sister’s position on the dance floor. “How do you mean?”

“Victoria, I fear, is not like you, Ruth. You are sensible, perhaps even old for your years. You have your feet planted firmly on the ground beneath you despite all this foolish talk about writing. But your sister’s head is in the clouds and I am fearful that she will never come down. This could all be her ruin. At the very least she will be insufferable for weeks once we return to Sutton Minety. We should never have come, I see that now, but there is the Earl, your uncle. You had better go to him and I will raise the subject with him as soon as an opportunity arises. I am afraid that your sister will not be best placed towards me once I do.”