

Chapter Eight

A Return to Sutton Minety

“So, you have decided that you wish to go home?” asked the Earl. It was the next afternoon and Ruth had not long risen when she went to her uncle’s sitting room. For a moment she was taken aback, having overlooked the conversation she had with her mother. Clearly her mother had not, and had been very prompt in finding an opportunity to raise the subject with her brother-in-law. “Are you not happy here?” he continued. “Do you not feel as if you are at home?”

“I have been very happy here, Uncle,” she said reflectively. “I will be eternally grateful for the kindness you have shown me and my family, but it is not my home, really it is not, dear Uncle. This is not my life and I would be fearful that I might grow too accustomed to it such that I resented the one God has chosen for me.”

“I see,” said the Earl. “I think I can understand that. I have read, though I do not necessarily subscribe to the view, that those who have been reared in poverty will never be really happy unless they are poor and that their longing for wealth is simply a dream to sustain them.”

“I do not consider myself as having been reared in poverty,” said Ruth, “nor have I any desire to be, or to remain, poor. But nor would I be rich or wish to live in opulence.”

“You clearly do not feel at home here?”

“No, not really, but I do not wish to upset you in what I say or appear ungracious.”

“I am not upset, Ruth. I am disappointed, but not in you. Perhaps it is in myself for not having foreseen this. I thank you for your candid honesty and I am not going to attempt to say that I disagree with you nor attempt to convert you. I have told you that, like me, you have a very determined mind. You take after your father. If I have any concern it is whether the cottage that you will return to will provide the right environment for whatever the future has in store for you, but that is something I would like to consider further. I will not impede the return of either your mother or sister to your home, nor you for that matter, but I do have a single further favour to ask of you. Regardless of when your mother and sister go home, will you stay as my guest until I am up and mobile again? The doctors think it will be no more than three weeks. Otherwise, every day of my life spent sprawled here will be dull and overcast. But, in equity, we have to have a means of deciding what would constitute me being mobile. Shall we say walking unaided? No, let us say when I am able take your arm and walk with you to the Italian Garden. Will you stay and read to me until that day? Once I am able to convey myself that far I will have some small compensation for your loss. That is all I would ask of you, Ruth.”

“Since it is you that ask it of me, and since you have been the best of uncles to both me and my sister, how could I possibly refuse?”

“And, as you mention her, what shall we do for your sister, the fair Victoria, whose honorary adoption is shortly to end?”

“For Victoria?”

“Well, my dear, although your good mother made no mention of the fact, I am afraid that your sister will not take the news of her leaving with the same equanimity as have you. I will have to provide something to soften the blow, perhaps not immediately. I would not wish to be the one to announce it to her. I will get your uncle, Mr Lancaster to ride over to Sutton Minety a few days after she has left and acquaint her with the details. What shall we say? What would you say to forty thousand?”

“Forty thousand pounds?” exclaimed Ruth. “Why, Uncle, that is a fortune! I am sure that mother would never permit her to accept a sum of that magnitude!”

"I am sure that she could be persuaded. And it would be arranged such that she could not touch the capital except to draw it down in stages over a period of years. Instead it would be invested such to give her an annual income. Do you think your sister could learn to budget and make expenditure equal income? I wonder if she could! I believe your younger sister is capable of developing expensive tastes in the fullness of time, in particular if she is given the opportunity. But an income of the kind this settlement would provide would help meet her aspirations, at least until she makes a good match, for that she must do. You mark my words."

"If that is so, Uncle, would it not be wiser to give her nothing, rather than give her something that will whet her appetite? Oh! Please excuse me! It really is not for me to say what is right or wrong for my sister, and she would not thank me for the doing of it, either."

"No, Ruth, I do not agree. It is refreshing to hear you speak your mind. You are both honest and open in your ways, your sister and you. It for that reason that I wish to assist her. As for what you say, you might be right, but her expectations will be raised and I would not be the one to disappoint her. In addition, although she has her looks, an income will better help her find a husband that can give her the fineries in life that she desires and you abhor."

"I am not sure that I abhor them, Uncle," said Ruth lightly. "I would not wish to be taken for a Puritan."

"No, Ruth. I understand that fully. I mean that these matters count for a great deal as far as your sister is concerned but for you they count not one jot. I doubt that they ever will."

"It still sounds exceedingly generous. I do not know how Mother will respond," said Ruth. "And, to think you turned away that odious young man the other day without as much as a penny!"

"Did you find him odious? Perhaps that is some interest upon the decision I made! And I do not think that your sister is determined to defraud me!"

"Oh, no! Victoria would never do anything like that!"

"As for your mother, I will leave matters of persuasion, such as will be necessary, to Mr Lancaster and your sister. I am sure that between the two of them, they will prevail. Let us give them a few days after they have returned home, and then he shall call upon them. Now, have you brought anything to read to me, anything by your hand?"

"No," said Ruth, lowering her head. "I have written much, more than ever I expected I would, but I fear it is poor quality and I must confess that I have nothing that is complete. I have brought Bleak House instead."

"Oh, well. As you have agreed to stay a little longer, there should be time for me still to hear your work, eh?"

"So you shall, Uncle. As soon as I feel it is ready."

Ruth was much in her mother's mind when she went to see her brother-in-law shortly before the time appointed for their departure. She had spent many hours pacifying her younger daughter who had, by now, stopped weeping and grudgingly accepted that she had been informed by her cousin that her uncle was not outstanding in his generosity, and that in any event he was cautious and if he were to make any gesture in her favour it would likely be weeks, even months, after they had returned home. This line was reinforced by Mr Lancaster who declared that he was upset to see his niece so distraught and that his sister was probably right in everything she had said. Ruth's opinion was not sought as Victoria made clear what part she thought her sister had played in the business. Indeed, Ruth unwittingly proved to be ready tinder for reviving the conflagration several times just when everyone thought the fires had been quenched. Eventually Victoria was subdued and convinced that she should be her normal self at the farewell - that, notwithstanding Miss Seymour's teachings, last impressions are often as important as first ones.

"I apologise, Alice, for my misjudgement of you and your daughters on the day you arrived," said the Earl. "Quite contrary to the view I held then, I have enjoyed your, and your daughters', presence here these past weeks. Indeed, nothing has given me greater pleasure than your visit for many years. You will not reconsider your decision? I think you are in a minority of one concerning it."

"I think that if you are honest, it is you that is in the minority," said Mrs Mottram.

"I accept that you are right. I will say no more about your decision. I know it is in Ruth's heart as well as yours. I am thankful to her, and to you, that she has agreed to stay a short while longer. The house will not be the same with you and Victoria gone. It will be quite desolate when she leaves as well."

"Thank you," said Mrs Mottram, rather too coldly for the Earl's liking, but he let it pass. "But I believe Ruth is right. We must go home. If I needed any convincing of that I have had it in the last few days. Every day further that Victoria spends here makes her return to Meadowview Cottage more painful, and that is wrong indeed, for that is where her life is for the foreseeable future. In time such a return might become impossible and it would be unforgivable if we were to allow her to become so spoiled. I take it that is not in your mind?"

"To spoil Victoria? Never! I may, in time take steps to ease her disappointment," he said, pausing and running his hand over his head. "If it is of any assistance, you can tell her that I have her future in mind, but that I hope that any steps I take will be measured. No, on second thoughts, perhaps you should tell her nothing at present."

"I would prefer not to raise her hopes further than she has raised them herself," said Mrs Mottram, still with a note of resentment in her voice. "And Ruth? What of Ruth? She was the very purpose of our visit. Have you decided whether a position can be found for her?"

"Of course I could find a position for her," said the Earl, "but I am convinced that we cannot for one moment entertain the thought of Ruth going into service. You must for a start consider how Victoria's prospects would be affected if her sister were a chambermaid. How would a future husband view that? What is more, how would a future mother-in-law look upon it?"

"I had in mind a position of a governess rather than a chambermaid."

"The difference is marginal. I have observed Ruth very closely, as you might expect. She has bearing and poise."

"But she has no looks, if I may say it myself."

"She is accomplished," continued the Earl, ignoring his sister-in-law's contribution. She is ambitious, but in a quite different manner to Victoria. Ruth would make something of her life by her own endeavours, not out of a favourable marriage."

"She has little choice in the matter!"

"You are being too hard on her, Alice. They say that beauty is only skin deep. Well, I have found her to be most beautiful. It would be unthinkable to condemn her to service. It would be equally unthinkable for me to underwrite the remainder of her life, at least certainly the next ten years for that is how long it may take for her to accomplish what she wishes."

"Do you have it in mind then to keep her here?" said Mrs Mottram, fearfully.

"No. She does not wish it, and I will keep my word to her. She shall be free to leave at anytime, but I trust she will hold to her's and stay until I am on my feet again."

"And her future?"

"Well, the truth of the matter is, Alice, that I do not share a single one of your reservations about her writing or her attempting to become established as a writer. I know it is a very difficult path to tread and that there are many who live out a miserable life in garrets on account of their lack of success. I would not permit that to happen to her. I would take steps to ensure that I was always aware of her position and circumstances. But within such unseen and silent protection as I can provide, I am of the opinion that we should allow her the opportunity not just to write, but to become a professional writer. I have a number of contacts in the publishing world, people I trust, hard headed business men like me who will willingly take her work if it is good, but not be charitable to her simply because she is my niece. There would be no difficulty in effecting an introduction, or in getting her published. That is all very well, but there is one fundamental difficulty, one question which I have been unable to answer - is her writing good enough to be published and to attract readers? Will she succeed? I have asked her whilst she has been here to write and to read what she has written to me. I know that she has written quite a good deal, but so far I have heard not one word. Not one!"

"Oh dear!" said Mrs Mottram, feeling that although she was completely opposed to the thought of her daughter writing, literature not being a respectable occupation for a young

lady, if she were to write she would wish to see her excel at it. "You are not just being perverse and saying all this, about our visit and Ruth's future, to spite me for the past?"

"Not at all, Alice. I am being absolutely honest when I say that I have enjoyed your visit, and when I talk about Ruth's future. You more than anyone else cannot doubt that I do have her best interests in heart. As for the past, I have nothing over which I could reproach you. It is the contrary, if anything, that is true, but the past is the past and we should let it remain so."

"Then, I am concerned that she has not read anything she has written to you. She reads enough when she is at home."

"It may be no bad thing. It may show that she is capable of self-assessment and criticism. She may fear that she will bring me something that I will think is sub-standard. But it all makes a decision about her future difficult as that hangs on her writing something. Indeed, her success will hang on her ability to consistently produce publishable work. It was partly with this in mind that I asked her to stay until I am mobile, to give her a little more time. And before you say anything, I assure you that am every bit as anxious to get back upon my feet as I am to hear her read her work to me."

"And, if having heard her work, you consider it sub-standard?"

"I shall tell her so, allow her to come home as agreed, and consider what should be done about her future then."

"Will you still find her a position?"

"I will make some arrangement which is both appropriate and satisfactory to all concerned. However, having said all of that, I am confident that I shall not be disappointed in her work. I do not think that there is anything more that I can say at present."

"Thank you," said Mrs Mottram softly, stood, and went to leave the room.

"If I invite you to come to stay here again, Alice, will you accept and come?"

"I think I would have decide that at the time, if and when such an invitation arrives at the cottage. I would say, though, that I would not be minded to decline it without good reason."

"Then I can say that I look forward to your next visit here," said the Earl. Mrs Mottram smiled, but did not reply, and slowly closed the door behind her. It was the last time he was ever to see her.