

Chapter Nine

A Proposal is Accepted

As she climbed into the carriage that was to convey them home, a gesture by the Earl which was compensation to a degree in Victoria's eyes, for at least she would be seen travelling through the village in it, Mrs Mottram charged her other daughter with the task of writing something that she could read to her uncle. "Although it goes against everything I have said or believe, you should take something of yours to him and read it. The sooner it is done, the better," she said. To any observer it was a contradiction of the stance that Mrs Mottram had taken earlier, but she felt that she would rather see her daughter succeed, even in an activity of which she did not approve, rather than fail in the eyes of her brother-in-law. And, if what he said was true, if Ruth turned out to be a writer and, contrary to Mr Clauncy's predictions, was successful, what was there to be concerned about?

"Of course, Mother," said Ruth, puzzled by her mother's sudden change of approach. "The truth is that I have written nothing that I would take real pride in. Everything seems good on the day that it is written, but next day I think that I could have expressed myself so much better. And now we have started reading *Bleak House* which will surely occupy me until it is time for me to return, and I am fearful of juxtaposing my work with that of Dickens."

"Could you not slip something in between chapters?" said her mother. "Your uncle is expecting you to read something and is growing concerned that you have not."

"Very well. I will see what I can do."

"Do that, then, my dear," said Mrs Mottram. "He will be very pleased, I think, with whatever you write. Say goodbye, Victoria!"

"Goodbye, Ruth," said her sister, rather coldly. Ruth waved and watched the carriage as it travelled slowly away along the drive, cataloguing the work that was deposited on and in the writing desk in the library as she did so. She had started numerous short stories, sketched out scenes from at least three full-length novels, and poured out an autobiographical account of their visit to Hazleton Court although she was careful to omit certain details. Now she resolved to take whichever one work she thought the best, complete it with all due expedition, and present it to her uncle.

She waited until the carriage had disappeared beyond the trees that lined the drive and past the spot where Roger had so rudely confronted them upon their arrival. Sadness overtook her, when she thought of the irony of Victoria being taken home, largely against her will, and her being left there when, perhaps, she would have preferred to return to the cottage. It was but for a couple of weeks, three at the most. Nevertheless, it was the very first occasion on which the family had been separated since Victoria was born, and that thought saddened her too.

Mr Twigg awaited her when she reached the top of the steps. "The Earl would be pleased to see that you did not leave with your sister and mother," he said.

"Did he think that I would?" she said, surprised and disappointed. "I gave him my word and, having given it, I always strive to keep it. As you have conveyed his feelings to me, perhaps you will convey mine to him!"

"I fear that I may have distressed you," said the Earl as soon as she presented herself for that morning's Dickensian reading. "Or shall I say I was a little less than thoughtful in the comment I made to Twigg. I do not think there was any malice in him conveying it to you."

"Well. I asked him to tell you that having given my word, I keep it. I trust that he did?"

"Indeed, he did, most aptly," he said, smiling and trying to dispel the small cloud that Ruth had brought into the room with her. "But it is I who is at fault and I must set out to make

amends in some way. It was particularly unforgivable of me given that you are probably already missing the presence of your mother and sister.”

Ruth was in low spirits, partly because of their departure, partly because the words Twigg had conveyed to her had hurt her pride and damaged her idea of the way in which her uncle saw her. Yet, when she peeled back the layers of her pain, there was something else at the core, something deep, seemingly irrational, something more fundamental than earning his trust, something she could not begin to understand let alone explain. After the morning’s reading she sat herself down at the writing desk and wrote a short story about lack of trust, misunderstanding and betrayal. Words were thrown down on the paper in a wild frenzy that occupied her fully right through lunch time and so deep into the afternoon that, upon the Earl’s instruction, Lucy was sent to the library to ask of her and whether she wished to take her tea there, or join her uncle. “Tea?” cried Ruth, almost as if the word was foreign to her. “It cannot be that time already?” She laid down her pen and, clutching the current volume, ran to the sitting room, arriving flushed, her hair down and sprawling around her shoulders, all of which amused the Earl greatly.

“So,” he said, “you have been busy, then?” Ruth nodded, fearing that she had dropped the book mark en route and feverishly trying to find the place they had reached at the last reading.

“I was completely carried away by my writing,” she confessed. “I lost all track of time. It was as if it did not exist, as if it leapt forward and passed me by in one enormous bound, from the morning through to the late afternoon.”

“I did consider, just for one moment, that you might be punishing me for what I said this morning!” he said jovially.

She smiled. She could see in his face and hear in his voice that he did not mean what he said to be taken seriously. “And so I was, Uncle,” she said lightly, “and you thoroughly deserve it on this occasion.”

“And, having thus punished me, am I to hear what it was that detained you, deprived you of your luncheon and nearly the same of your tea?”

“Why, yes,” she exclaimed. “I have made such strides today and I feel I am as ready as ever I shall be. When we have completed this chapter, I shall start.”

And thus it was that Dickens was partly set aside, and the reading of Bleak House left incomplete, as in each of the three weeks that followed, Ruth wrote or re-wrote two short stories and read them to her uncle. He listened intently, would nod, ask her to read passages a second time, but made no comment than that if he had to have a favourite it was the one she had written immediately upon the departure of her mother and sister. Other than this, she received no words of gushing praise, nor catastrophic criticism. Her uncle would thank her and say that he looked forward to the next one. But Ruth needed no words of encouragement to write. The logs had been untangled and the flood of words and ideas that she had amassed came tumbling out, stretching her to the limit of her ability to keep them in order. Her life seemed to assume a new harmony which was disturbed only a few days into this period by a letter from her mother, the contents of which she disclosed to the Earl.

“She has become very concerned about Victoria who had become very restless and not her usual self.”

“How so?”

“Mother cites a lack of attention to her appearance as an example. She thinks she is pining for cousin Roger. He quite swept her off her feet at the Ball, speaking many words of endearment and promising that he would call on her at Meadowview Cottage, yet he has not.”

“Many words of endearment, eh? I was not aware of that. Of course, I had one of my less good days and missed a proportion of that gala. Well, I doubt that any of his words were well meant.”

“Oh, Uncle!”

“Well,” he said, disdainfully, “you know what my views are about that young wastrel. Still, in his defence it is a long journey to make across country and Roger is not the most active of men.”

“He did it before!” Ruth declared.

“I am sorry?”

“He did it before. A day or two before ever mother received your letter of invitation, Roger visited us. At least, he visited Mother, in secret. I do not think we were to know but we met together, by chance, when Victoria and I were on a walk. Mother has never told us the nature of his visit, but I have always assumed that it concerned Victoria.”

“Are you sure?” said the Earl, puzzled.

“I cannot be absolutely certain, but I could think of no reason why he should be in our district and so close to the cottage. Of course, Mother is not here to be asked.

“I do not think I need verification. I can think of one other reason why he might have visited your village, but that is all rumour. No, we should allow him the benefit on this occasion. Could I have slightly misjudged him? I do not think so, Ruth. He is most certainly a leopard and his kind stay true to his nature. I imagine he was up to no good on both occasions. If he has not called upon your sister that is because he has, and never had, any intention of doing so. She is better placed without him.”

“I hope that is not the truth of it,” said Ruth, “for according to the letter, that is not the way Victoria sees matters.”

It certainly was not the way that Victoria saw matters. Indeed, she did not talk of anything else throughout the journey home, and had barely discussed any other topic subsequently. But there was more, far more than Mrs Mottram had conveyed in her letter. Victoria had launched into a sustained attack upon her sister, complaining that although it was she who her uncle had adopted as a daughter, it was Ruth who had paraded each day in the limelight and who, even now, was performing daily on this little stage to which she, the once-adopted daughter, was denied. But Ruth had wheedled her way into their uncle’s favour and to her sister’s dis-benefit. It was wrong, and she had said so all along, for Ruth to spend so much time with him and for him to spend so little time with his daughter. At the same time, Ruth had become cold and off-hand with her and disrespectful towards her mother, taking their uncle’s side when it came to writing in the full knowledge that their mother disapproved of it. She was becoming arrogant and clearly seeking to place herself at an advantage in their uncle’s eyes! Why else had she stayed with him when everyone else had returned home?

It was down to jealousy, Victoria declared. Ruth was jealous of the attention that the Earl had afforded her at their very first visit. She had always been jealous of her sister’s good looks, as she possessed none of her own. And now she was jealous of the attention that their cousin had paid her throughout the Ball! That was it! Ruth was conniving and plotting because she wanted their cousin for her own! Of course she did not love him, not in the way that Victoria did! Instead she wanted first to spite her sister and then, ultimately, if what was said about cousin Roger was true, not that it had any import for, or influence over, Victoria’s feelings, she was aiming to become the next Lady Mottram. Did her mother need evidence? If she did it had been there on the night before her very eyes in the shape of the necklace which Ruth had also wheedled out of their uncle! There was absolutely no doubt that Ruth had asked her uncle to let her wear it, and may be keep it, as she was not having a Ball arranged for her. Oh, she was so clever, what with all her little plots and schemes that she devised! And all the time she was simply seeking to work against her innocent and vulnerable younger sister and further her own ends!

It was then on the third day of the tantrums and mopings that Mrs Mottram, unbeknown to Victoria, wrote the letter to Ruth, selecting her words with great care.

“I am asked to press him to call upon them,” Ruth continued.

“For a start that will be difficult because I understand that he has been in London since the night of the Ball. Secondly, I do not trust his motives as I cannot see what he would gain from courting or marrying your sister.”

“Could it not be that simply he has fallen in love with her? She is such a sweet young thing, I cannot imagine that any man would not love her.”

“Roger is not any man, but you may be right, Ruth, and I am wise enough to know that if these two young people are of a mind to bind themselves together, nothing on Earth is likely to stop them. However, I would not wish to be the instrument of their union.”

“But, would you oppose it, Uncle?” The Earl paused and looked thoughtful.

"I should be prepared for that question, but I find that I am not. My instincts tell me that I should but, no, I would not. If that is what they genuinely desire, and as I say I think of no ulterior motive for Roger to have intentions towards your sister, I would have to reluctantly give them my blessing."

"Oh, Uncle!" exclaimed Ruth. "I am sure that will make Victoria very happy when I write and tell her so."

"I would rather you did not. Young Roger does not presently appear to be showing much inclination in that respect. He can be very erratic and I would prefer that he shows us his intentions before I answer a question that may never be asked. I think you must just write back and say that as far as you know, Roger has been in London on business, because that is the truth of it, and that you are not yet certain when he shall return."

Which is what Ruth did. Her letter was not well received by her sister. "There!" she declared. "If you needed proof of it, there it is Mama!"

"Ruth is only conveying what she understands to be the case," said Mrs Mottram. "She says nothing about her own part in this, only that she has not seen cousin Roger since the Ball and believes that he has gone to London."

"That is what *she* says," snapped Victoria. "But she sees herself as a writer, does she not? And they are always making up things and taking liberties with the truth. The plain fact is that she is there with cousin Roger and I am here! I demand that you send for her immediately!"

"Send for her, Victoria? I could not do that. What reason could I possibly give?"

"Say that you are ill, or that her cat is ill. I do not know! I do not rightly care what you say as long as Ruth is brought back so that I can observe her."

Mrs Mottram wrote back to Hazleton Hall Court, but her letter was not couched in any way that approached the terms demanded by her daughter. She asked after the Earl's progress, hoping that if that had been good it might have brought forward the day on which Ruth returned of her own accord. Ruth, having no appreciation of what was at stake wrote back to say that he was improving, but that she thought it would still be another two or three weeks before she could accompany him to the Italian garden. Thoughtlessly, she also commented that the cooler days of Autumn were approaching and that she trusted that he would be able to accomplish the feat before the weather started to deteriorate. And it was shortly after completing and sealing this letter that Ruth met her other uncle in the entrance hall of Hazleton Hall Court.

"I was hoping that I might see you," he said. "I have heard such promising things about you from the Earl."

"But you have come to see him?" said Ruth, fearing that he might be bringing bad news.

"I have seen him. He had a number of important matters to transact and some instructions for me to discharge, one of which concerns your sister, Victoria."

"The settlement? Oh, Uncle, I am so pleased as Mother writes to say that Victoria is much put out since she returned home. That will take her mind off other things when she learns of it."

"What other things?" said Mr Lancaster.

"Cousin Roger, mostly."

"Well, it will be good if it does take her mind off of him. If this achieves that it will have served its purpose immediately."

"I fear that it could do exactly the opposite, but then I am always inventing plots and dramas and seeing dangers where none exist."

"I trust that it does not," said her uncle, "as that is not what is in the Earl's mind, I am sure."

"Then I hope that I am wrong!"

"Time will tell," said Mr Lancaster. "For the present there are things that I must attend to, and your other uncle is an exacting taskmaster - do you not find him so? In a few days I am to journey over to Meadowview Cottage to put the matter to your sister. It will take close to a full day to travel there and return, but subject always to the Earl's views, would you

like to accompany me? I could hire a two in hand and call here on my way from Tetbury. Alternatively, we could travel by train. I am sure that your uncle will be prepared to release you for one day.”

“I do not know,” said Ruth, hesitantly. “I will have to speak to him. But I will ask him and get a message to you.”

When she did so, the Earl gladly assented and insisted that they should both travel in one of his carriages. And it was Victoria who, looking out beyond her visitor into the front garden from whence she sat, first saw Ruth as her uncle helped her dismount, causing her to suddenly give an immediate answer to a question that otherwise she might have taken several hours, if not days, over.

Mrs Mottram was almost speechless when she opened the door to them. “Why!” she exclaimed. “Ruth and you, Henry? What does this mean?” Then she lowered her voice and added, “Victoria has a visitor!”

“Who?” said Ruth. “We saw the horse tethered outside and wondered to whom it belonged.”

“Your cousin Roger. He arrived some half hour since and asked my consent to talk to Victoria on what he described as an important matter.”

“Oh dear!” said Mr Lancaster.

“Have I done wrong?” said Mrs Mottram, but before her brother could express his opinion, Victoria burst out into the hall, followed after a short while by Roger.

“Ruth!” she said, coldly. “What a surprise! You have arrived at a most opportune moment as I have an announcement to make! Cousin Roger and I are engaged and to be married!”

It seemed to Ruth that everyone started to talk at once. It seemed to Victoria that her announcement did not receive the kind of reception that she expected.

“You cannot do this,” said Mrs Mottram, ushering her and Roger back into the sitting room. “I cannot allow such a thing, not without consulting your uncle. And I am sure that Mr Clauncy will have a view on it as well.”

“Victoria’s mind is made up on it,” said Roger, boldly.

“Yes, indeed it is,” said Victoria and glared at her sister. “What have you to say about it, Ruth?” she snapped.

“I do not know really what I should say,” said Ruth, taken aback. This was nothing like the way she had imagined her homecoming and almost resented her cousin’s intrusion. “But I am sure that Uncle will give his consent. Indeed, I am certain of it.”

“Are you?” said Victoria. “How can you say that but that you have already discussed the matter with him. Have you? Have you been discussing my future happiness with Uncle? What better is it that he has charted for you? You should tell me as I have a right to know what my sister has been scheming.”

“Victoria!” exclaimed Mrs Mottram. “You should not speak to your sister like that!”

“Well, Mama, you know how she plots against me and opposes my wishes in everything.”

“I am sorry that you think that, Victoria,” said Ruth calmly. “I have nothing but your future happiness in mind.”

“And what brings her here in this day of all days?” continued Victoria, determined. “Well, what ever it was, she is too late. Cousin Roger has proposed and I have accepted him and I will not stand for any interference in it, not from my sister, not from my mother, and least of all that Mr Clauncy!”

“What does bring you here, Henry,” said Mrs Mottram, hoping that a change of subject might reduce the tension which was rising in the small room.

“Me?” said Mr Lancaster, looking at Ruth. “Why, I had business in the area and I suggested that Ruth might like to travel with me to see you. When the Earl heard of our plans he insisted that we came by his carriage. And so, here we are.”

“It was not Ruth’s idea?” demanded Victoria.

“Not in the least. It was entirely at my instigation,” said her uncle.

“I see,” said Victoria, glumly, walking to where Roger stood, trapped in a corner of the room, and taking his arm. “Well,” she went on, addressing her small audience. “I think you should all congratulate us and wish us every happiness.”

“I have some damson wine in the kitchen,” said Mrs Mottram, suddenly, concluding that if the situation was to be retrieved, it could not be done at present. “Ruth, fetch the best glasses. You know where they are kept. We will toast your health, Victoria!”

“Yes, indeed!” said Mr Lancaster.

“And Roger’s too!” protested Victoria, but her mother had left the room.

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