

Chapter Ten

A Setback

“Well, said Mr Lancaster as he ceased waving and sat back in the carriage. “What are we to make of all that?”

“I am not at all sure,” said Ruth. “I did have the impression that perhaps it would have been better had I not accompanied you. I am not at all sure what Victoria thinks I have been doing, or what she is accusing me of. Mother mentioned nothing in her letters.”

“I must thank you for your tact in not mentioning the business on which we came.”

“I felt it was not my place to do so, Uncle. I was sure that although the whole thing was a shock, it was not something that would have slipped your memory.”

“It did not, but the moment that your sister made her announcement I decided that I should report back to the Earl and seek fresh instructions. There is always the possibility that he may wish to amend the terms of the settlement. I would not be betraying any secrets were I to tell you that he mistrusts your cousin, and that this mistrust has manifested itself in recent weeks. I can say no more than that on the subject, but knowing that much you will understand why I held my counsel.”

“I understand, and I think it was the right thing to have done under the circumstances and shall tell him so.”

“Do you wish me to accompany you to see the Earl when we arrive back?”

“No, Uncle, not unless you expressly wish to consult him this evening. It will be dusk by the time we reach the Hall and I am sure that you will wish to set out for your home as soon as possible. I am quite happy to report to him all that has transpired today, including the action you have taken.”

“Then I shall call upon him tomorrow, and see what his wishes are.”

Ruth waited at the foot of the steps whilst Mr Lancaster’s horse was brought around. “You were right, Ruth,” he said, looking down at her. “It is growing dark and will be so before I reach home. I will see you tomorrow.”

Ruth found Lucy waiting for her. “Oh, Miss Mottram,” cried the girl, looking quite distraught. “It is the Master! He has had a fall!”

“A fall?” cried Ruth. “How could that happen? Where was he?”

“In the library,” said the maid. “He was found there, late this afternoon, lying on the floor. No-one knows how he came to be there nor how long he had been there. He has been taken to his bed and has been asking for you.”

“Have the doctors been sent for?” said Ruth, lifting her skirts and dashing up the stairs.

“They were sent for, have come, and have now departed,” said Lucy, following her. Mr Twigg was at the top of the stairs.

“The Earl is in his bedroom, Miss Ruth. He is awake and has been asking for you.”

“I will come to him immediately,” she said. “But how did this happen?”

“We do not know, and the Earl has not confided in us,” said the secretary. “All we do know is that it was not discovered that he was missing from the sitting room until Lucy took in his tea, which he was taking alone today on account of you not being here.”

“I should never have gone home today,” said Ruth.

“I instigated a search of the house and the Earl was found, unconscious, in the library. It would appear that he may have fallen and struck his head. An alternative is that he was struck on the head by persons unknown, but a quick examination of the room showed no signs of entry, nor anything missing.”

“I should have remained here,” said Ruth. “Could he have gone there to see me, forgetting that I had gone to Sutton Minety? Whatever the truth, I was not there and perhaps I should have been!”

The Earl was propped up in his bed between two large candelabra which stretched up from the floor some five feet into the air. She thought he looked weaker, older, and frail, but a half-smile appeared on his ashen face as she entered. "This is all very unfortunate and foolish," he said, weakly. "It is as well that I have a loyal household else you might not have found me here this evening."

"I came straight up," she said, hastening across the room and examining the darkening lump on his forehead. "Lucy says the doctors have been. May I have some cold water and a small towel, please, Twigg?"

"Most certainly, Miss Ruth," said the secretary.

"Now what have you done to yourself and how did this come about, Uncle? I am told you were found in the library."

"I do not wish to account for my foolishness in front of the servants, not even before Twigg, but since we are alone I can tell you that I thought I might walk through to the library and back. I was successful in reaching it, and rested sat at your writing desk, but as I came to stand to return my leg seemed to do no more than collapse beneath me, toppling me forward. I assume that I struck my head as I fell. And I have sprained my wrist in the bargain. It is well that it is not my dominant arm. It was not a very dignified manner in which to conduct myself."

"Nor a very sensible one, either, if I may be so bold as to say so."

"You may, but I do not wish to be scolded for my folly. I think I have been charged enough for it."

"But why were you trying to get to the library?" she asked.

"Trying? I succeeded!"

"Was it to see me? Did you forget that I would not be there?"

"Will you be disappointed if I tell you that it was not to see you, but I thought I might see the place where you sit and write. I will never have the comfort of coming into the room and finding you there, especially not now as the doctors tell me that I have set my recovery back by my actions."

"Oh!" she said. The secretary returned with a bowl of water and the towel she had asked for. "Do you mind if I apply this to the bruise. It will help bring it out."

"Not at all, Ruth," he said. "I cannot think of anyone who I would rather have play Nightingale for me."

"Well I am not sure that I really ought to pamper to you. Had you wanted to see where I worked I would gladly have assisted you, or you could have got any one of the servants. John, for example. He is a strong, young man. Why did you not send for him and have him take your arm? At least there would have been someone there to catch you!"

"Ruth, my dear child," said her uncle slowly, "I do not wish to be interrogated on this matter no matter how foolish you think it was or how much you consider that I deserve it. I freely admit I should have acted more sensibly given my age and position, but shall we say I wanted to surprise you with just a little piece of intelligence that could only have been gained by my presence in the library. Such an innocent wish, and it has backfired upon me. Now, I feel that I would like to rest once you have completed your treatment."

Ruth felt that she had been chastised although nothing that had happened had been of her making. Perhaps had she not travelled with her Uncle Lancaster she would have been there and the Earl would have stayed safe on his sofa. "Well," she said as she dabbed gently at his forehead, "you have given yourself a nasty blow. A very nasty blow and it has split the skin. I fear there will be a scar there in time."

"As I said, I may have struck my head on the writing desk, or on the edge of the side-table that is nearby. I cannot be certain which, and it signifies nothing." He closed his eyes and Ruth felt concerned.

"And you went right to the far end of the library," she said softly. "I wish I had been there. And now we may have to extend your convalescence."

"I fear so," said the Earl, drowsily. "But I do not want this to affect your plans to go home, you understand? You will go home on the day we agree that I would have been strong enough to reach the garden, and on today's showing that should be quite soon."

"I do not think that we need discuss that this evening, Uncle. "You should preserve your strength. We can talk further on the morn. I will leave you to rest now."

"Goodnight, Ruth," he whispered.

"Goodnight," she said and kissed him on the part of the temple that was not bruised. Twigg was at the door when she reached it. "I am concerned about my uncle's condition," she said. "He was thoroughly examined by the doctors when they came?"

"Indeed, he was, Miss Ruth," said the secretary, looking over her shoulder.

"Well, he appears to me to be worse than I have seen him and very weakened."

"The doctors said that in their opinion that was due to the impact of the floor in addition to which he had used up his strength in walking unaided to the library. I do not think there is any cause for concern."

"I hope you are right, Twigg," she said sternly, and went to her room. "Goodness!" she said to her reflection in the glass in the un-curtained window, "What a day this has been! Victoria engaged to be married and as yet I have not told uncle!" It was true that when she had seen his condition she had decided that she would not say anything to him about what had happened at Meadowview Cottage that evening. Tomorrow, Mr Lancaster would ride over, so she would see the Earl as soon as she could once he had been washed and had breakfast. He should hear the account from her lips rather than those of her other uncle.

The next day was stormy. Dark clouds hung over the house. Rain lashed in torrents at the windows or cascaded out of the gargoyle spouts far onto the drive and paths. Candles were lit as a necessity in many rooms and John came in, soaked, to report that a large ash tree in the grounds had been struck by a lightning bolt and was destroyed. For Ruth there was one small consolation. Mr Lancaster would not venture forth in this weather, not even for the prospect of a fee!

She did not go to see her uncle until Lucy came to the library and said that he had asked for her. "I wanted to allow you to rest as much as possible before you saw me," she said when she was alongside his bed. "Even now I am not sure that I should talk to you, although I have much to tell you. Would you wish me to read to you?"

"Later," he said. "I do feel somewhat better this morning and more akin with my normal self. And I have matters that I wish to talk to you about. I mentioned last night, did I not, that this incident is not to affect our agreement concerning your going home. I would not wish you to believe that it was no more than a crude and melodramatic device to extend your stay here."

"But who will read to you, Uncle, if you are still bound to your sofa?"

"I will have to fall back on Lucy. I will have to do that once you leave in any case, no matter when you leave as leave you must."

"I do not understand why you put it that way," said Ruth, perplexed. "Have I offended you in any way? Please tell me if that is so as it never has been my intention."

"Oh, Ruth! My dear Ruth. I do not think you could be capable of offending me. No, you may place your mind completely at rest on that account. It is simply that there is something that I must say to you, about yourself."

"Uncle?" whispered Ruth, her heart falling.

"It is about your future," he went on slowly, moving about in the bed as if to make himself more comfortable. "I do not want you to misinterpret what I say, but from what you have read me of your writing I think you have a future in that profession if that is the one you really desire. I cannot be certain, you must understand that, but I have tried to suppress any personal feelings I may have in making my judgement. Contrary to what your good mother may believe, it will not be your undoing and there is a clear possibility that you could earn enough for your keep. I do not know what some of the ladies who came to the Ball and whispered behind their fans would say to my suggestion that a niece of mine should earn her keep. If that is what you wish, Ruth, then I will not be the one to deny it to you."

"Oh, Uncle!" she cried, kissing his brow once more.

"There is more that I have to say. I will clear up one point first. I did consider making a settlement on you as I have your sister."

"Oh, that is one of the things I have to talk to you about!"

“It was not enough?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that.”

“Then we will come to it later. As I was saying, I did consider it, but I am assuming that you would not welcome one, at least not at present?”

“No,” Ruth said, shaking her head. “Please do not think of me as having no gratitude, but I would rather not be encumbered with a sum of money or even an income. I think it might deter me from my aim.”

“Well, I will respect your view, but I would ask you to remember that if you do encounter difficulties like Mr Micawber, you have only to ask and I will take pleasure in providing.”

“It does sound so ungracious of me, but I would rather make my own way in the World if I can. I hear of so many young ladies who spend their youth occupied with nothing other than the search for a wealthy husband. I would not have me be that way.”

“You do not wish to be wealthy?”

“Not particularly,” said Ruth.

“And, if you were so, what would you do. Suppose you were in my position? Would you be prepared to use your wealth for the benefit of others and discharge all the duties and responsibilities it brings? I say this in the possibility that you might become a very successful writer.”

“I doubt that even the most successful of writers is sufficiently well endowed to be excessively charitable,” said Ruth, smiling. “But in the unlikely event that such an unthinkable thing actual happened, I would try to emulate you in every respect, Uncle.”

“Not to the extent of knocking yourself unconscious, I trust. Well, I have thought very carefully about the way your future should develop and sought advice as to what steps you should initially take. I hope you will accept my advice more readily than my wealth, Ruth?”

“Of course!” she said, lightly.

“In that case, I have a number of very good contacts in the publishing industry, all of them hard-nosed business men who would not be in the least charitable towards you even if you are my niece. But I have sufficient influence with them to effect an introduction and that first step is often the most difficult that a would-be writer has to take. If you will allow me, I will write to the one who looks as if he could offer you the best start in the business. I would expect him to want to interview you and read some of your work. If he likes it, you will have to take matters from there. If he does not like it, I will try the next. May I do that much for you without running the risk of offending you?”

“It sounds to me a little more than advice,” said Ruth, a little surprised at the thought her uncle had given to the question of her future, “but I will gladly accept the offer of an introduction.”

“I have two other things to ask of you, Ruth. In fact they are small items that I wish to give to you. Firstly, there is this small image of me painted some years ago by none other than a painter called Millais. I would like you to have it and keep it ever by you in remembrance of what I hope have been happy days here.”

“Oh, they have, Uncle! I shall cherish it.”

“The second thing is that I would like you to have the writing desk. I believe that you are comfortable at it and, like the image, it too will remind you of your stay here. I hope that you will continue to work happily at it. And before you become concerned over its worth, it does have some value but it is not significant. I am sure that you will be able to accommodate it in your cottage, or where ever else you may find yourself. Please tell me that you will accept it as I fear that despite all the wealth at my disposal there is little else that I can both offer to you and you will accept.”

“Then I will willingly accept it as a gift and take it home with me. I am sure that it can be fitted in my bedroom. I will endeavour to always work at it and I shall place your image on it so that when I am working I am reminded of my days here and the very best uncle a young lady could wish for!”

“Now, you have something to say to me as my business is at an end?”

“Why yes! I would have told you last night, but you were clearly shaken and fatigued so I saved it for today. When we reached the cottage we found cousin Roger was there before us!”

“Ah!” said the Earl. “I thought as much was possible.”

“You thought so?” said Ruth puzzled.

“Yes,” said her uncle, waving his hand, “John came to report to me yesterday morning that young Roger had taken a horse from the stable and had said that he was to be out for the whole of the day. I wondered if it could be that he was aiming to ride over to Sutton Minety. Pray go on.”

“Well, we were barely inside the cottage when Victoria burst upon us and declared that cousin Roger had proposed marriage to her!”

“The Devil he has!” grunted the Earl. “I suppose that she has accepted him?”

“Yes, she has. Mother said that she should not have done so without her consent or your consent at which Victoria, who had not taken very long in considering her answer, was very disappointed so I said that I thought you would have no reason for withholding your consent.”

“Not at all impetuous, is she, your sister?”

“Oh, she was so full of impatience and excitement, declared that it was the greatest day of her life, and I did not wish to allow anything to mar it in any way.”

“And what excuse did young Roger give for this proposal?”

“Well, you will appreciate that none of us was there in the room when the proposal was made, but Victoria told us that he had apologised for not having gone to see her earlier, but had been in London on business and had realised that she was the dearest, sweetest, most adorable creature in his life, that he could barely live a day without her being close to him, and that he would not rest until she was his. Those were her words. But as I said, Mother prevailed upon her to submit herself to your arbitration in the matter. I said that I would plead her case if necessary although I think that given the opportunity she would readily come here to represent herself.”

“That will not be necessary,” said her uncle, thoughtfully. “And Mr Lancaster? What were his views?”

“Perhaps I had better first tell you that faced with this development he decided not to raise the subject of the settlement with Victoria, but to seek fresh instructions from you. I believe it was his intention to ride over today to see you but, of course, he is not aware of your fall and I would expect him to delay his visit until the weather improves.”

“And his view concerning the engagement?”

“Perhaps it is wrong for me to say this, and it is possible that he may moderate his stance once he adjusts to the idea, but yesterday he was made very uncomfortable by it and had some harsh words to say about cousin Roger once he had left.”

“Your other uncle is a shrewd man,” said the Earl smiling. “What exactly were his concerns?”

“I do not think I should repeat them,” said Ruth, feeling uncomfortable. “I think that in all fairness I should leave him to make any representations that he wishes to make himself.”

But it was true that Mr Lancaster had spoken out against cousin Roger. He was suspicious of Roger’s motives and had wondered whether he had got wind of the reason for the solicitor’s visit to see his niece. “There is the question of your age,” he told Victoria.

“Mama will not oppose me on that point, will you Mama?” declared Victoria excitedly. “And plenty of young girls, younger than I, are married. Whence did age become an impediment to marriage?”

“Well,” said Mr Lancaster, “there is the question of exactly how he will support you and where you are to live.”

“Roger tells me he already rents a house in London in connection with his business interests. He proposed that we should live there.”

“To my knowledge he has little money of his own,” said her uncle.

“Well, he has never struck me as being short of money! Your knowledge must be flawed, Uncle!”

“Victoria,” scolded her mother. “You are not to speak to your uncle in that tone!”

“It is all right, Alice,” said the solicitor, patiently. “What I am saying, Victoria, is that the money that Roger spends is other people’s money and not his own.”

“Do you mean he is an embezzler, Henry?” said Mrs Mottram. “Surely that cannot be?”

“I am not sure that would be the appropriate word under the circumstances. Shall I just say that he is capable of cutting close other persons’ cloth, and leave it at that?”

“All businessmen are like that,” said Victoria, bitterly. “And Roger is involved in business. And before you tell me that it is not a honourable profession I would point out that Earl Mottram is a businessman who is involved in business! So are you to oppose my marriage, Uncle? I am sure that Ruth will!”

“No,” said Mr Lancaster. “I am not happy with the prospect of it and have grave reservations, very grave indeed, but I am not going to oppose it. I will defer to what ever decision Earl Mottram makes in this respect.”

“There, Mama!” said Victoria, tight-lipped. “You can instruct my sister, here, to inform the Earl that my other uncle does not oppose the marriage. Perhaps she can convey that to him?”

“You can trust me to convey everything that has been said, truthfully, if you wish, Victoria,” said Ruth.

“I would ask you to convey only one thing, sister, and that is that Roger has proposed marriage and I have accepted him!”

“What I was commissioned to tell you was that cousin Roger has proposed to my sister, Victoria, and she has accepted him,” said Ruth. “And she will be bound by your decision.”

“My decision?” said the Earl. “I am not sure what that should be. What are your views upon it, Ruth? Is he suitable? Will he make your sister a good husband? What do you think?”

“Me? Why, I do not know! I hardly know cousin Roger for a start, as such time as he did spend here he spent in the company of Victoria.” Ruth looked closely at her uncle, but his face revealed nothing, certainly not that here was a father in judgement of the future of his daughter!

“But you know of him and what is said of him.”

“I do,” Ruth said, thinking of what was said of Victoria and wondering if her uncle would be content to allow the truth to remain concealed, “but I would not wish my view to be swayed by what others said about him. And in any case, I do not think it would be right for me to pronounce on the matter. I know how much this matters to Victoria, and I would not wish ever to see the position reversed where my future was in her hands.”

“Sometimes all you have to guide you is other is the views and opinions of others,” sighed her uncle.

“Then I am sure that some very poor decisions are made.”

“That may be so, but would you not wish to stop your sister if she were doing something foolhardy?”

“Is she doing something foolhardy?” said Ruth, slightly alarmed.

“I do wish I knew for certain, Ruth. I am convinced that young Roger is not, and probably never will be, as ideal husband, but if I have misjudged him and these two young people really love one another, who am I to keep them apart? I could not bring myself to enlist him into the Navy and have him despatched to the other side of the Empire. Nor can I prevail upon your mother to have Victoria placed in a convent.”

“Oh, no,” said Ruth, seriously. “Victoria is not at all suited for life in a convent.”

“Is she suited to the kind of life that she may have to live with Roger, I wonder,” mused the Earl. “I suppose that they will have to be married here and at my expense.”

“Why, no, Uncle,” said Ruth. “That is another odd thing. Roger told Victoria that he knew that she was virtually penniless and that her mother would not be in a position to give her a dowry, so he proposed a small, humble, wedding at the church in Sutton Minety. And, he said, that providing it was kept to modest proportions he would be pleased to meet all the bills. There was no suggestion to Victoria that he would be looking for any subsidy from you.”

“As yet,” said the Earl.

“And they are to live in his house that he has rented in London. He has told Victoria that there will be plenty for her to occupy herself in the way of entertaining. It is as well that Miss Seymour covered the skills of being a hostess!”

“Well, I do not know what to say! This is a side of young Roger that he has not revealed before, at least not to me. Was there mention of when this quiet, modest, wedding shall take place?”

“Victoria said that they had agreed that it should be soon, as soon as was reasonably practicable given that there are arrangements to be arranged, and Victoria has commissioned Mother to make the wedding dress.”

Her uncle looked thoughtful. “Perhaps it would be wise for your sister to insist that the wedding is held as soon as practicable, and before he changes his mind!” He caught sight of his niece’s expression and added, “you may disregard that remark. Shall we say that I do not propose to obstruct the nuptials and that they can marry with my blessing? I will not interfere with their plan to marry in Sutton Minety as there is a convention of weddings being held in the bride’s parish. But I will consider what modification, if any, I should make to the settlement I propose for your sister and discuss it with your Uncle Lancaster when the weather permits him to visit me. And you shall write to your sister and mother immediately to inform them of my decision, of all except the settlement. You may write concerning that in a few days’ time.”

“Oh, thank you, Uncle,” she said, kissing him once more on the brow. “It will be one of the most pleasant and pleasing letters I have ever had cause to write!”