

Chapter Eleven

A Wedding in Sutton Minety

It was several days before Roger presented himself at Hazleton Court Hall. Ruth was not present when he went to see the Earl and expressed his sorrow at hearing of his mishap, declaring that he would have come earlier had he known, but he had been called back to London on important business matters which required his personal attention. He went on to say that no doubt Ruth had conveyed the news of his visit to Victoria and her mother, and had reported on the matter transacted there. He said he had now come to see the Earl to ask for his consent to and blessing on their union. In reply the Earl confirmed exactly what he had asked Ruth to say in her letter which, by now, had been in Victoria's trembling hands for a number of days. Roger then confirmed, in a very matter of fact, business-like, manner, the arrangements that were being made for the wedding, and expressed his hope that the Earl would not take offence at his independent action whilst expressing disappointment that he might not be able to join them as a welcomed guest at their humble wedding breakfast. He offered to postpone the wedding until the Earl was recovered, except the intelligence he had received suggested that it might be several weeks before the doctors would permit a journey of that magnitude. Indeed it might not be practicable for the Earl to travel to Sutton Minety that side of the next Spring, and his niece was anxious and impatient and might not wish to wait that long. They *could* all come to Hazleton Court, but it was Ruth's mother's wish that the ceremony should be held in the local church if the Earl could see his way to permitting it. Even so, they were all prepared to submit to the Earl's wishes.

There was no reference to the cost of the wedding, or a dowry. Nor was there any suggestion of a financial settlement which led the Earl to comment to Ruth that he thought it was the first time that Roger had ever been to see him without raising the subject of money, something he found quite unsettling. So the Earl gave him his blessing and told him that although it was a disappointment to him that they wished to hold the wedding somewhere other than there, in the chapel where so many Mottrams had been married and, later, laid to rest before him, he would not oppose it. It probably was the most pleasant interview Roger ever had with the Earl.

The substance of the meeting was conveyed to Ruth later in the day. By coincidence, Roger was then some miles away and giving his account to his colleague in the Monmouth Arms at exactly the same moment. "So, it is all settled, then?" said the colleague.

"Indeed it is," said Roger, gleefully rubbing his hands. "It could not have gone better had I written it all myself. It was masterly and I was magnificent! The first stage of our enterprise is complete. But I must tell you. You must hear it all with your own ears."

"Mmmm," murmured his companion. "I am not sure that we have yet reached the stage where we should congratulate ourselves. There's a few problems to be overcome still."

"So there might be. You have managed to procure it, what we need for the second stage, have you?"

"Yes, indeed," said his colleague, producing a box in which were a number of phials. "Better than this, a colleague who works in the Tropical Diseases section has been telling me about a rare form of Botulism that they have isolated. It comes from Central South America and, before you become concerned, is not contagious. It has to be ingested, but a single small dose is enough for it to do its work."

"Which is?"

"Well, it works in a number of ways, affecting the blood, gradually destroying the vital organs. Its most obvious feature is when blood vessels burst, discolouring the victim's skin, making it look as if it is bruised. Frequently these areas, which are usually quite small, bleed, become infected and turn septic. It can be most unsightly and it is very unpleasant.

Best of all, it is virtually unknown in Europe, so there is virtually little chance of a correct diagnosis. And even if it were diagnosed, there is no known remedy.”

“How long does it take once it is administered?”

“How long?” said Matthew, contemplatively. “Some of the symptoms appear within days, such as the discoloration of the skin, but death depends on the strength and resistance of the victim. Someone who is already weak might succumb in less than a month. However, it is believed that some who catch it live three or four months. There can be no debate as to which of those is the more fortunate!”

“It sounds preferable to this,” said Roger pointing to the box. “Can you lay your hands on some?”

“In time I dare say that I will be able to. It may take a few weeks, months even, but I will. But this is what you will have to use for stage two.”

“We!” corrected Roger. “But I was going to give you an account of our triumph thus far. I followed exactly the course I mapped out and having paid great attention to our Victoria at the Ball, I pointedly absented myself for the days that followed. I had no doubt how she would react. She is such a self-centred, feeble-minded, creature! When I did arrive at the cottage I made sure that I could see her alone and I did not tell her mother of my intentions. I knew that Victoria would accept me. I had absolutely no doubt of that, but I was a little concerned that she would play this silly little vain game that women play of stringing one along. There was the possibility that if she gave me a token refusal, or deferred, her mother might rally the opposition against the union. Well, I must admit that my heart fell, as although I had no doubt I would prevail ultimately, it was clear from her reaction that she would prevaricate. But just as she was sat there, trying to decide quite which way to go or what to say, who should appear outside at the garden gate but Ruth and that interfering fool, Lancaster! At any other time their presence would have been detrimental to our cause. On this occasion it was the very catalyst I needed. I am not sure what there is between Victoria and Ruth but there is little in the way of sisterly love. Victoria took one look at Ruth through the window and virtually fell over her pretty self in accepting my proposal before her sister reached the front door! It could not have been better than had I planned it!”

“Well,” he continued, “there were a few trivial difficulties to overcome, but it was plainly difficult for either her mother or her uncle to oppose Victoria whilst I was there without traducing my character to my face. Once I was satisfied that the position was as secure as I could make it I was free to leave. I have no doubt that some harsh words would have been said after my departure. I also anticipated that it was likely that representations would be made to the Earl. So, I thought I ought to take steps to conceal, shall I say, the motive for proposing. I took some delight in insisting, in Victoria’s presence, that the wedding should be a most modest affair in the church there in her village. Oh, I could read her thoughts and see the anger and disappointment in her face, but it would not suit our purposes for me now to look to the Earl for anything in respect of the arrangement of the marriage or the disbursement of expenses. I said I would bear the lot. I said that I cared little for the absence of a dowry. Lancaster was, of course, speechless. Victoria was about to explode and probably did later, once I had left. I doubt that her mother’s statement that she would make her wedding dress was sufficient consolation. But I knew all this would get back to the Earl. Indeed, I waited a further couple of days, then went to see him to reinforce what I had let be said.”

“Yes,” said the other. “I thought that if there was a risk it was that the Earl would seek to protect his daughter even if he could not recognise her in public.”

“Indeed! I began to regret the close examination I had given Lancaster on the subject of the Will. If he suspected that I knew about the change in the Will, the Earl would surely assume that that was my motive in proposing to Victoria. I decided that the safest course was to purposely make no mention of the inheritance, not of my expectations, nor of hers, not that she is aware of them. That would give him a little difficulty in voicing any position on that ground without revealing either that he had disinherited me, or favoured her. I, of course, was in position to say that I could not be marrying her for her money as she had none. No, it was because she was beautiful, lively, adorable, and I loved her.”

“And he has accepted this?”

“Absolutely. What ever he might have thought I did not receive one word in protest. Everything is clear for me to marry his daughter and he is even prepared to give a dowry just to show to the World at large that he is not being parsimonious although, I must make it clear, I did not as even make the slightest suggestion to that effect.”

“And the timing of the wedding?”

“We are to be married just about as soon as such can be arranged. Again, in this I was virtually unopposed. My uncle hinted that he would have rather we waited until he was fit enough to travel, but accepted that given Victoria’s impatience, of which he has some experience, that should not be a deciding factor. Which is as well as if Lucy now does her job correctly we would have been waiting a very long time! Shall I be really provocative and see that you are invited?”

“I think it would be prudent if I remained an onlooker. I think our connection should remain a secret for the present. Now, perhaps, all we have to worry about is Ruth, providing you are sure that there is no chance the Earl will change his Will yet another time. I mean, he could favour Ruth!”

“His niece?”

“Well, she would appear to have worked herself very close to him of late. You are sure that there is no chance that he might prefer her to Victoria, especially if she is now married to you?”

“Ha!” Roger laughed. “Anything is possible with that old skinflint. There are two things in our favour, possibly three. Firstly, she is his niece and he is unlikely to favour her more than his daughter. Secondly, Ruth is, I hear, destined to be packed off somewhere, Lucy tells me. The Earl has been writing to people he knows in the business of publishing to find her a position. She has aspirations towards writing, you know. Once she is out of the way, if there is any hint of him dithering, and I have instructed Lucy to report everything to me she hears so I should know, I will trot Victoria down there just to make sure he does not change matters. And, thirdly, we are really not going to give him all that much in the way of time in which to change his Will.”

“Lucy, again? Are we placing too much reliance on Lucy?”

“She is a good girl, and knows how to accommodate a fellow when he is in need of it. I have given her good reason to be jealous and resentful of both Ruth and her sister. And I have promised her a good position and a fine house in London when this is all over and we have docked and unloaded our vessel. I think the little minx thinks I may marry her. I am not about to disillusion her. Not yet a while!”

“And Ruth?”

“She drops out of the equation. If I can feed the current animosity just enough venom to keep it alive, Ruth’s influence over Victoria will be gone and she will no longer cease to matter to us. They will clearly come together for the wedding, but once I have my wife in London I will sever all communications between the two of them.”

“I still do not like it. We are taking steps to control Earl Mottram and Victoria. You have Lucy where we want her. Mrs Mottram does not present a threat, but I still worry about Ruth. We should not underestimate her. Perhaps we could marry her to Angelo?”

“Marry her to Angelo?” said Roger. “No, that would never do. The two of them must be kept apart because she is intelligent enough to become suspicious if he were to tell her what the venture is and what our needs are. And she would learn of your involvement. No, once Ruth is bundled off to her position, and I am sure it will be a fitting one for an Earl’s niece, we will be free of her.”

“I hope you are right.”

“So, it is all settled and arranged?” Ruth asked her uncle. “I will have to return home for it.”

“And so you shall,” said the Earl. “My meeting with Roger has brought about no alteration in the arrangements. They are to be married as soon as practicable. The ceremony will be rudimentary and at Sutton Minety. I have to confess some surprise at what that young

man said or, rather, what he did not say or demand. But you were right. It appeared that he is to marry her for love!"

"I did not say that," said Ruth lowly.

"You have misgivings, Ruth? Are you having second thoughts? After all, it was you who brought the request for my consent to the wedding, was it not?"

"I am not sure," she said. The truth was she did have misgivings and suspicions of her cousin's motives. He would have heard the same rumours as she. He could well be marrying Victoria on the strength of those rumours, but it was not something she could talk to her uncle about easily. "I am concerned for you, Uncle," she went on. "I am worried firstly that you will decide to go to the wedding against all advice. I am worried that you will be criticised for seeming to be ungenerous in not giving your niece the style of wedding that the niece of an Earl, and one who is reputedly one of the most wealthy men in England, should receive. Can you not prevail upon them to hold the wedding here?"

"My dear Ruth. I could have been, and I expect I have been, criticised all along for the fact that my nieces and my sister-in-law have lived in relative poverty all these years. I must say that I am grateful than neither you nor your sister, nor indeed your mother, has ever reproached me concerning this state of affairs. Your mother would accept no more than a small pension when my brother unfortunately died. She was like you, wanting to make her own way and not be beholding to anyone. You expect that of me in respect of yourself. You should not criticise me if I respect a similar request from someone else, on this occasion from your cousin."

"I am not being critical, Uncle. I am concerned as to what others will say."

"Let them say it. As for me doing something foolish again, I think I have learned my lesson. Sadly it looks as if I shall not be present at Victoria's wedding. I did ask Roger if it could be postponed until I am fully recovered, but I fully understand your sister's impatience."

"I fear that she may be marrying him for the wrong reason. I fear that she is seduced by the attractions of a house in London, and London society."

"I cannot say whether it is the case or is not," said the Earl, shaking his head. "I am sure that your sister declared her reasons. I am equally sure that you have to accept them, as did I Roger's. Now, I have instructed Twigg to write to your mother to offer any assistance what so ever that she may wish in the arrangements. I may still be able to help in a small way. And your Uncle Lancaster will shortly be communicating details of the planned settlement which will give Victoria an annual income in her own right, and the dowry that I will settle upon her. I think that is the extent of what I can do. I am just sorry that it is now over, and seemingly so soon."

"All over, Uncle? I do not understand what you mean."

"This is the end of your visit. You will have to return home shortly as your place will now be at your mother's side." There was something in the Earl's tone that she had not heard before, something more than simply regret at the need for her to leave.

"I will not have to go immediately," Ruth said, leaning forward and smoothing one of the sheets. "And I could always return after the wedding."

"I must confess, Ruth, my dear, that there is probably nothing on Earth that would give me greater pleasure, or more fortify me, than the thought that you would return."

"Then I shall," she said, forcibly.

"No, Ruth," he said, again shaking his head. "I know that I have only to ask you and you would, but I cannot ask you to forego the opportunities that may present themselves to you and with which you must occupy yourself. We have all but settled Victoria's future. Now we must look to settle yours and I fear yours lies somewhere other than here."

"You concern me when you say that Victoria's future is all but settled. You do not think that Roger may jilt her, do you?"

"No. If it will put your mind at rest, I will increase the dowry. I know that finances have not thus far featured in his petition to me, but I am sure they are never far away. Not where he is concerned."

“You are very generous, Uncle, but I think if there is any question of him marrying Victoria not for the money she has clearly not got, but in the expectation she might receive some, we should disillusion him now. It would be better to promise her nothing.” Ruth felt that she was brave to say this. Of course, she could say that she had only the dowry in mind if the Earl challenged her argument, but she was interested to see whether there was anything in the way in which he reacted to suggest there might be more than the dowry at stake. In the event, she saw no such sign.

“I know what you are saying. I comfort myself in the knowledge that he proposed to your sister before there was any thought of a dowry. No, I am satisfied that the dowry did not influence his original decision, but it might now be sufficient to stop him wavering.” Ruth thought of arguing that Roger might have proposed in the anticipation of a generous dowry, given the fuss that the Earl had made of her sister and the prominence he had given her during her stay, but perhaps that was pressing the point too far. Victoria was already less than kindly disposed towards her and there was likely to be more than a little tension in the cottage when she did return there. How much worse it would be if her sister learned that she had been responsibly for a reduction in the size of the dowry, or even its cancellation? “It is now the time to discuss your future,” continued her uncle. “I have taken the liberty to write to the contacts I mentioned, in particular to one Anthony Braithwaite of Braithwaite & Sunbury, a London-based firm of printers and publishers. I informed him that I have a niece who I consider to be highly accomplished at writing and who wishes to earn her living at such an occupation. I asked him to consider whether your work was of the standard that he should publish it, which I, for one, consider it is. I then asked him, as a first step, to contact you and arrange to meet you as I think he may be able to assist you in seeking to become established. At the very least, he can advise you.”

“Should I not send him some of my works?” asked Ruth. “He may wish to read something before he decides he wishes to see me.”

“It is not necessary. He knows my tastes and respects my judgement. He knows I would not harm my reputation by recommending that he meets you without being certain myself that he will accept some of what you have written for publication. What you must do is put together half a dozen of your best pieces, set out in your fairest hand, and be ready to take them to him. It will be a start.”

“You are very good to me,” she said and kissed his forehead.

“If I cannot have you here with me, the next best thing is for me to see you settled in an occupation of your choice. I know that you will be successful in the fullness of time. I only pray that I will live to see that day.”

“Oh, Uncle! You should not say things like that!. It is very bad of you. Of course you will live to see if I succeed or fail as the case may be.” She checked herself. “And I should not talk that way. Of course, as you are my sponsor, I shall succeed.”

“Of course,” he said. “It is just the melancholy I feel at the thought of your departure. It will pass.”

Ruth was completely unprepared for the series of cataclysmic events that followed her departure from Hazleton Court Hall and which turned her life upside down as the onset of Winter filled the skies and shortened the days. It started with the wedding which had been the sole topic of discussion in Sutton Minety and for some miles around. Mr Twigg’s services had been accepted and he had supervised the small amount of organisation that was necessary whilst Mrs Mottram procured, marked out, cut out, tacked and gradually assembled the dress that Victoria demanded and which she was for ever changing in one detail or another, such that even on the Wedding Morning, Mrs Mottram was still being asked to make, and making, small alterations.

Ruth was sorry to leave her uncle and right up to the point at which she kissed him for the last time and climbed into the coach alongside Twigg who accompanied her on her journey, she had been tempted to change her mind and announce that she would stay. She accused herself of being perverse as it had been she at the Ball who had suggested to her mother that the time had come to return to Sutton Minety. She knew also that the longer she

stayed with her uncle the greater became Victoria's suspicions and resentment. Common sense told her that there was no acceptable alternative, but that did not make the leaving any the easier.

"Now, you will write to me regularly, will you not?" said the Earl from the chair at the top of the entrance steps to which he had been half carried. "I would like to receive a short account of the progress you are making. Nothing elaborate, of course, as I would not want my selfish requests to divert you from your vocation."

"Of course I will write regularly," said Ruth. "I would like to think that I will be able to come over and visit you from time to time."

"If you are placed to do that and can spare the time, let either me or Twigg know and the carriage will be despatched, but I fear that you will not have many such opportunities. But you will always be welcomed here, Ruth. Always. And I shall miss your company so very much. Now you must go. Twigg is waiting, and I am sure that your mother could avail herself of his assistance as well as yours."

She was surprised at how many things there appeared which required attention for even the simplest of weddings. Perhaps the most significant matter was the question of whether Roger would travel and present him on the day, or stay overnight locally. When it was suggested that he might travel that morning, Victoria became very agitated, complaining that either he would not come, or he would arrive late, or have an accident or, worst of all, fall victim to some notorious footpad, although she was unable to cite a single one when pressed. Roger presented the solution, one which surprised and in its way thrilled Ruth, when he announced that Dr Fayrbrother, hearing of his predicament, had stepped in and offered him the hospitality of his house on the wedding eve. Mrs Mottram was not well pleased and Mr Claucy pronounced that such a foolhardy venture might cost Roger his soul, but Victoria declared that it was the least of all the risks she had identified, and prevailed.

Of course, she was not to see him that morning when the Earl's carriage, black, polished, gleaming, carrying the Mottram coat of arms, was halted outside the cottage and Victoria, looking more pretty than she had the night of the Ball, escorted by Ruth as her only bridesmaid, stepped into it. But he was there, at the end of the short aisle when she arrived in the entrance. Ruth thought the church, be-decked with flowers brought all the way from her uncle's gardens that very morning, looked breathtaking. Surely, she thought, even if this is one of the most modest weddings a Mottram could be expected to have, it will be remembered and talked of here for years by those who were able to squeeze into the tiny church. She felt happy for Victoria as she stood behind her and heard her respond in a clear, unwavering voice. When she glanced at her mother, she could see the tears glistening on her cheek, but they were of joy, not sorrow. Yes, this was Victoria's day. This was the beginning of the life of which she had always dreamed and, God willing, the life that she would now have. "I will never stand here, like this," she thought. "I will never taste the joy that Victoria is now experiencing."

Their eyes met when her sister, having been kissed for the first time by her husband, turned and prepared to leave. Ruth had hoped that there might be a reconciliation, but she saw little other than triumph in Victoria's expression. Then there was what Ruth would have described as a "moment" in her writing. In truth it was lost on the majority, if not all, of the onlookers, but as the couple reached the gate and the crowd of villagers and well-wishers parted to let them pass, there on the other side of the Green stood Dr Fayrbrother and Matthew. The couple stopped as if their presence there was an impediment to their further progress and Victoria turned to look at her sister. There was something different in her expression now, something that haunted Ruth. It was not triumph. It was not some form of recognition that Matthew, her sister's paramour as she liked to call him, was there. It was a look of apprehension, of fear, and Ruth did not understand it. Then the moment passed and the couple were on their way, walking, as was the tradition, through the village back to the cottage, followed by Ruth, Mrs Mottram, a troupe of Miss Seymour's young ladies, most of the congregation, and many of the other villagers. And what ever they might have thought about the holding of the wedding there, or the modest arrangements, all were agreed that the

groom was a handsome young man, and that the bride was probably the prettiest that would ever come to that altar and pass into holy wedlock.

That evening the happy couple appeared for the last time in the village at the dance held in their honour in Jed Owen's barn which had been painstakingly cleaned and gaily decorated for the occasion. Ruth was pleasantly shocked to find Matthew Fayrbrother there, partaking of the fruit punch but, under the watchful eye of her mother, he said little to her other than "good evening Miss Mottram," which was support enough for several days for Ruth. Then Victoria and Roger were leaving, tears in her eyes as she hugged her mother, travelling to the London house by the last train that very evening and to go on the next morning to honeymoon in an unspecified location. And Ruth and her mother suddenly found themselves alone.

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