

Chapter Twelve

A Visit to London

In the days that followed immediately upon the wedding Ruth sat herself at the writing desk which had fitted snugly into one corner of her small room, contemplated the image of her uncle which she placed carefully in a prominent position, and wrote. Mrs Mottram seemed ill at sorts about everything. It was not just the writing, which she said she would tolerate on account of what Earl Mottram had said of it, though it was against her better judgement to do so, and certainly against that of the Curate who declared that the very possession by a young lady of a writing desk was probably blasphemous, it was the image that confronted her every time she entered the room. "Why did he give you that?" she asked. "What did he say when he did so?"

"Nothing, Mother. He simply said he would like me to have it by which to remember him."

"Nothing else?"

"No!" Ruth told herself that her mother had a fetish concerning images of relatives for it was true that there was none in the cottage, but in deference to her uncle she left him where he had asked to be, and where he was, on top of the writing desk, and resolved always to keep him there.

It was more than a week before a letter arrived from Victoria, bearing a Swiss stamp, describing the environs of Lake Como, but saying much about the London house which she excitedly described as over looking a large and fashionable park, and the wonderful presents and entertainments that Roger was promising her. Mrs Mottram read the letter, then Ruth read it, then her mother read it again. Although nothing was said, Ruth could see the relief on her mother's face. Clearly she had shared some of Ruth's concerns about her sister's future, but these were being gradually dispelled now.

But a day before the arrival of Victoria's letter, Ruth had receive a letter marked with a London franking. "I have to go to London," she announced calmly, once she had read its contents.

"Go to London?" said her mother with dismay. "Not alone?"

"Well, not necessarily, but there is the cost of the return fare to be found as well as the choice of a companion."

"Perhaps your Uncle Lancaster could accompany you? He is always going to London."

"I am asked to go the day after tomorrow," said Ruth. "That leaves little time to contact him, receive his reply, and make the appropriate arrangements."

"It leaves plenty of time," declared Mrs Mottram, "and if he cannot you shall write and say that you are unable to go on that day. Go to London alone, indeed!"

"Oh, Mother! There certainly will not be time to contact uncle and write as well. He may be busy on the day after tomorrow and be unable to make the journey. In any case, I must go. It is an important interview about my writing."

"Oh!" said her mother, not sounding either pleased or excited. "I will have to speak to Mr Clauncy."

"No you will not!" said Ruth. "It has nothing to do with Mr Clauncy and I would prefer it if he did not concern himself with my affairs. An alternative, if it would put your mind at rest, would be for you to accompany me."

"Me?" said Mrs Mottram, shocked. "Me, go to London?"

"Yes, Mother. You go to London. What will you do if an invitation arrives from Victoria, once she is back, to go and stay in her London residence? You would surely go then?"

“That is different! That is not my daughter travelling alone. That is out of the question! I shall write to your Uncle Lancaster this instant!”

“And I shall go to my room and reply to this invitation by accepting it!” declared Ruth. The letter was from Mr Braithwaite of Braithwaite & Sunbury, and asked if she would be kind enough to attend on him at fifteen minutes past eleven o’clock at his City office for the purposes of discussing the publication of some of her writings and asked her also to bring some of the said writings with her. “Of course I shall go, Uncle!” she told the image. “Accompanied or alone!”

When the day came without any response from Mr Lancaster, Mrs Mottram grudgingly walked all the way to the station with Ruth, and all the way back to the cottage again. “This is against my better judgement,” she said as they stood together on the platform. “No good will come of it. No good at all!” The kiss that her mother gave Ruth was perfunctory and Ruth noted that she turned her back and started to walk from the platform as soon as the flag was waved and the train started to move. She felt somewhat saddened as she sat back, clutching firmly the folder in which she carried her selected works, and prepared herself for the change of trains at Swindon, and the rest of the journey to the City. She had lost the affection she had once shared with her sister and it was now becoming plain that her writing was a wedge that would be driven between her and her mother. The Earl had said that he did not think that Meadowview Cottage was a suitable place for her to work. At the time she had considered this little more than a plea to her to stay with him, but now she could see that his comment was prompted by the thought of other factors. Yet there was no alternative, no real alternative.

Her destination was a small, ground floor, suite of offices just off Finsbury Square. The name “Braithwaite & Sunbury, Publishers and Printers” was painted with gold paint in a generous arc on the glass in the door, below which was a less ambitious notice which informed the reader of some of the regular publications that were put out onto the street by the firm, none of which Ruth had ever heard mention. She felt nervous as she went into the outer office which had dingy walls which had once been cream above a dark green wainscoting. Two further doors led from the outer office. One was closed but the other was open allowing Ruth to catch a glimpse of a large desk, a bookcase, and a window, the view from which appeared to consist entirely of a nearby brick wall. Upon her entrance a tall, thin, concave man stood up and addressed her. “Miss Mottram? Mr Braithwaite is expecting you.”

She was shown into the other office which appeared to overlook a small, damp, courtyard. “Ah, Miss Mottram!” said the corpulent man who stood up from behind the desk and gestured her towards a chair. “Concerning whom your esteemed uncle, Earl Mottram, has greatly raised my anticipation. You have brought me something you have written for me to read, I trust?” He squeezed himself back between the arms of the chair and carefully placed a pair of small glasses on the tip of his nose. “Let me see,” he added, impatiently Ruth thought. Gingerly, and still not having spoken a single word since she had entered this man’s office, Ruth took out one of the short stories and pushed it across the desk to him. “How many words?” he said suddenly. Ruth did not know what to say, and he repeated the question slightly more sharply than before. “You have a very neat hand,” he then declared, at which compliment she smiled cautiously. But as he began to read and she saw what she took to be a frown appear on his forehead, she began to become fearful that this was the full extent of any compliment she was likely ever to receive in this office.

He read the first page, then part of the second, then looked up abruptly and asked if she had brought anything else. Ruth’s response was to look inside her folder and empty its contents onto the desk before her. “May I see?” he said, stretching out his hand. “Now, unless there is anything here of which you are particularly proud, I would ask you to sit there and to not to say another word whilst I sample these.” Ruth watched him with growing dismay as he turned over page after page, occasionally emitting a low grunt which she was unable to attribute either to pleasure or annoyance. Perhaps her uncle had been entirely wrong in his assessment of her work or his predictions of her future? Perhaps she had no future. She would have spoken up in her favour and in support of her writing, but she did not know what to say and had, in any event, been bidden to silence.

Then he suddenly stopped reading and looked up at her. "What can you be thinking of me, Miss Mottram?" he said. "Do not answer that! Do not say a word, not a single word! I know what. We are both in need of refreshment. Tea and cake I would say, would you not agree? There is no need to answer. I can see the assent in your eyes! Moss! He is very good, you will come to discover, Miss Mottram, very good at arranging things, and tenacious too, and one of the best at tea and cakes. Moss! You might keep that in mind. Moss!"

In response to the third summons the door opened and the tall man from the outer office appeared. "Ah, Moss! Must everything be in triplicate, including my summons? You have met Miss Mottram and she tells me she is in dire need of tea and fruit cake having journeyed all the way up from the country!" Ruth started to open her mouth as if to speak, but he went on. "There is no need for your supplication, Miss Mottram. I am perfectly happy to represent your interests in this matter. Indeed I am delighted to do so. Tea and cake, Moss. Cake and tea! And crumpets? Is it too early for crumpets?"

Moss did not speak, but nodded towards Ruth who lowered her head in response. Mr Braithwaite returned to his reading and did not break off until Moss returned ten minutes later with a loaded tray which he placed on the desk in front of her. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to pour for us, Miss Mottram?" said Mr Braithwaite without once looking up. "And do partake of a crumpet. They come from a shop only two doors away and are famously good throughout the City."

Mr Braithwaite's expression revealed nothing as he sampled his way through Ruth's manuscripts. He sat back after he had turned the last page and fixed his eyes upon her. "Well," he said slowly. "It is all fiction I see. Have you tried any factual reporting? Any accounts of the news? Anything for a local news sheet?"

"No," said Ruth, feeling that it was far from positive for this to be the first word she had spoken since she entered the office. She was ready to defend the omission, but was denied the opportunity.

"I see," continued Mr Braithwaite, reaching across and taking the cup of tea that Ruth had poured for him. "They are good, are they not, the crumpets. And do try the fruit cake. That has something of a reputation, too. So, no news reporting. Well, I think you should try your hand at it. You have a good sense of drama and setting, and it is the next best thing to direct experience which, as a woman, you are not likely to be able to obtain. All agree that the best writing is that which is drawn from the experience we receive at first hand. Look at Little Dorrit. You have read Little Dorrit. Indeed, our printing works is not far from the Marshalsea. Yes, experience is an essential for a writer, and report writing is the very best next thing. Have they not told you that, Miss Mottram?"

"I am afraid that I do not fully understand you," Ruth said, feeling more than a little helpless.

"Do not understand me? I am not given to being misunderstood. Indeed, brevity and lucidity are two of my most prominent attributes, as my good wife often observes. But I will elaborate and explain it in a nutshell. When we receive the first particulars of some disaster, be it a shipping loss or a mining accident, or perhaps it is not a disaster, it is some glorious military victory or some noble rescue, fair maiden snatched from the very jaws of death, or it could be a particularly gruesome killing of some poor soul who has had his throat cut from ear to ear and, if you will pardon me saying that I know this will affect your sensibilities but the stories that you will have to deal with and report upon can be very raw indeed, Miss Mottram -" Mr Braithwaite paused for breath at this point before continuing. "When we get in this initial report, whatever it is, we have to produce a full report for our readers. They will not be satisfied with two lines reporting a railway accident in Darlington, or a bridge collapse on the Tay. We have to make a full detailed report, with eyewitness accounts, personal details of those who survived, miraculous escapes of mothers and children. We have to tell it all."

"I am sorry," said Ruth, "but I still do not understand. You say that you have only the barest of information yet you are seeking to write a full report?"

"Why, Miss Mottram, clearly you do understand! I could not have put it more succinctly myself."

“But if you have only the barest of details, where does the additional information come from?”

“You write it, Miss Mottram. In a perfect world you would visit the scene, interview any who witnessed the incident and the survivors. There is no doubt that if you did that you would produce an accurate, historical, account which would stand up against cross-examination in any court of law. But that would take you weeks, Miss Mottram, and we have to be first on the streets if we are to sell. In addition, although the reading public wants to read of the disaster in minute, gory, detail, they are not over concerned as to the accuracy. A flavour is all they need. Just a flavour. So, we create these accounts. We write them as if we were there on the spot and saw everything that has happened. That is what we do.”

“Isn’t that rather dishonest?” said Ruth, nervously. “I mean, writing fiction and passing it off as fact?”

“Dishonest, Miss Mottram? Dishonest? Bless you! You would believe and rather report the accounts of so-called eye witnesses or survivors? How can you tell whether their stories are true accounts or even representative? Someone sat at the rear of a train has no experience of the events leading up to and concerning a head-on collision. Those fleeing a city being sacked by the Saracens have no first hand knowledge of the atrocities that are actually happening in the houses, shops and churches. Very often they will tell you what they think they saw or what they were told. All we do is to use creative writing to put ourselves in the position of being there ourselves, and the beauty of this is you can do this all without ever leaving the office, Miss Mottram. Now, you had better tell me now if you think such an occupation will offend your scruples.”

“I had not considered undertaking such an operation as the one your describe,” said Ruth.

“Of course, of course, I am getting advanced of myself. Let me go back and describe the business of Braithwaite and Sunbury and our publications. This, where you are seated, Miss Mottram, is our City office and headquarters, but our printing works, the All Saints Printing Works, is south of the river, not far removed from Waterloo station which now is the main terminus of the South Western Railway. We have three main regular publications of which the first is the Daily Pitch which, you will readily gather from its name, is a daily newspaper. And a hard-hitting one, too, if I may say so, Miss Mottram. It is particularly popular here in the City, but we sell copies as far away as in the counties of Kent, Essex and Hertfordshire. As it is a daily paper, published each and every day except on Sundays, the copy is written daily although we will occasionally use articles written in advance. We have a weekly publication called The Etna which has a combination of news stories, articles of general interest and short stories. And we have a monthly magazine called The Vesuvius in which we publish short stories, more articles and serialise novelettes and novels. By all this you will appreciate that we are able to publish a wide range of material in these publications and, indeed, require to receive a wide range of material submitted for publication. However, I should make it plain, and you will probably be aware of this if you are a regular reader of our publications, that we are very selective and normally publish the work from a small range of known writers.”

“Oh!” said Ruth, unable to conceal her disappointment.

“Ah, that is the secret of success, Miss Mottram. It is not just enough to write articles or stories that are readable, but you have to have a name, a name that the reading public knows, trusts and recognises. We will have to find you a name!”

“A name?” said Ruth. “I already have a name.”

“Ah, but is it one that the public will remember or trust? Will our readers say oh yes, I know him, I will read his writings?”

“His writings?”

“It must be a man’s name. Very few woman succeed in this business. You have to remember that you will be writing about matters, gruesome matters, that might make some gentlewomen faint at the mere thought of them. I cannot see the public standing for those reports to appear under a woman’s name. No, you would have no credibility. You would not be taken seriously or be reckoned as a literary force to be reckoned with. No, we need a name

that will inspire confidence, that the reader will trust, a name that says read me to the as yet unconverted reader."

"But what is wrong with my name, Ruth Mottram?" she asked, feeling that they had leapt a considerable part of the business, but pleased to be discussing such a positive element. "Why should anyone reading something written by Ruth Mottram consider it to be less serious than the same written by Ralph Mottram?"

"Ruth Mottram?" said Mr Braithwaite, pensively. "Ruth Mottram? Some writers do write under their own names, but in journalism it would be a radical approach for a woman to do so. And our publications do not follow a radical line, you must appreciate. I do not hold with political campaigning, least of all by women. You are not a female radical, are you, Miss Mottram?"

"Not that I am aware of," said Ruth.

"Good. We are not trying to start any kind of revolution, we at the Daily Pitch."

"Oh, I certainly have no aspiration to ferment a revolution of any kind. But why not Ruth Mottram?"

"Let us try it on Moss. Moss!" The wrinkled face reappeared in the doorway. "Moss. What would you think of a writer called Ruth Mottram. Would you read what such a person wrote? Would you feel you would want to read what someone writing under such a name wrote?"

"It aint been done afore," said Moss, looking at Ruth with a twinkle in his eyes.

"There!" said Mr Braithwaite.

"But it's a good honest name with a ring of reassurance about it," continued Moss. "I reckon it could be tried without anyone coming to harm. That's what I reckon."

"But would the public, our readers, buy it?" asked Mr Braithwaite.

"I reckon as the young lady could try it and see how it fits her. And if it were plain that it is too short, or too long, or too tight, she could go for a different one. That's what I thinks."

"Ruth Mottram," repeated Mr Braithwaite once again. "I suppose that it has something of a ring to it. And perhaps we could make something of you being the Earl's niece?"

"I do not think my uncle would care much for that any more than I would."

"Or perhaps we could emphasise your connections by terming you as Lady Ruth Mottram?"

"Oh, that would never do. I am not Lady Mottram nor ever shall be."

"It would just be authors' licence," said Mr Braithwaite.

"I am sure that would greatly displease my uncle and I fear he is not a man to be trifled with," said Ruth. "I think it should be plain Ruth Mottram with no reference to any family connections."

"You may be right, Miss Mottram, but if I am to judge by the tone of the Earl's letter he might be amenable to some reference, certainly if it were likely to afford you the support you will need. But, subject to the views of my partner, Mr Sunbury, we can start with Ruth Mottram and be careful in the choice of subjects that we give you to write upon. I mention my partner as I will have to verify everything with him as I do with all business matters. He occupies, I should explain, the adjoining office except he is not here today."

"I am sorry," said Ruth, her heart pace quickening, "but we appear to have leap-frogged one very important detail in this discussion of my name."

"We have?" said Mr Braithwaite, looking around the office as if the answer was concealed there. "And, Ruth Mottram, that is?"

"You have not stated whether, having read some of my work, in your opinion, I have any future as a writer, whether you will publish any of that which I have written, and whether having done so, anyone will take the trouble to read it."

"That sounded to me like three important points but I will not take the trouble at present to enumerate them," said Mr Braithwaite, waving his hand to dismiss Moss who was still stooped in the doorway. "Well, my dear Miss Mottram, and here I must chose my words with care, not that my good wife, who is the best of arbiters, ever accuses me of being slack

with my use of the English language, as I would not wish you to fall under any misunderstanding. Your uncle wrote to me stating that he thought you had a clear gift for placing words on paper and conveying meaning, feelings, drama and pathos to anyone who read them. I think I may have said earlier that I have never had cause to doubt his word, and nor has what I have read here today caused me to change my opinion. These stories, in as much as I have been able to digest them, are publishable as they are written and I think, again subject to my partner's views and I have no doubt that he and I will be as one in this matter, I think I would like to bring them out in *The Etna*."

"Oh!" said Ruth, feeling excited.

"Ah, but that is the easy part. You must not be under any illusion. We run a business here, Miss Mottram, and our writers are paid in accordance with what we receive from them, print of theirs, and the quantity we receive upon selling our publications which contain their works. Your uncle wrote that you are likely to be entirely dependent on that which you earn from your writing. By that I assume that he is making you no allowance?"

"None," said Ruth.

"Not even to assist you in becoming established?"

"No," said Ruth. "It was my choice."

"I see. I must assume that you arrived at that decision without advise or any guidance as I can tell you that it will be difficult. You probably have heard of artists and composers starving to death in freezing attics. You must appreciate that writers may fare no better, no better at all. Am I worrying you, Miss Mottram?"

"No. I have always intended that if I succeeded I did so by virtue of my own efforts and nothing else, Mr Braithwaite."

"A noble sentiment indeed, Miss Mottram, and one that I, as a self-made man, applaud whole-heartedly. But it would be remiss of me, and you might later reproach me, if I did not tell you that it may be a very hard path that you have chosen, in particular for the first two or three years. No matter what I or your uncle think of your work, success is by no means guaranteed. And being impoverished and a woman in London is not without its perils."

"If I thought I was in peril, Mr Braithwaite, I would return home."

"And it is not a question of simply writing that which you wish to write. You will have to be prepared to write almost anything, to satisfy any demand. You will have to write to order, and to time, not just when the fancy takes you. It is a hard task-master. You are sure that you are prepared to make the sacrifices?"

"Yes," she said resolutely.

"Very well," said Mr Braithwaite. "We had better get down to business. Your uncle has left to my discretion the nature of your employment. All he has asked is that we engage you in such a way as to afford you the best experience and so secure the best opportunity a writer can have towards achieving success. Now, I must make it plain that I am not a charitable man, so you will have no cause to fear that I am favouring or subsidising you in your career. But I think of myself as a fair and just man. I think, indeed I have no doubt of it, that you should join the staff of the *Daily Pitch* as a reporter. We will give you a range of topics to handle, but I can tell you more concerning that latter. In addition, I would like you to write for *The Etna*. I will take a short story every second week. We can start with these which will give you a start and for which we will make you an advance. Do you think you can write a short story each fortnight, or better?"

"I would be happy to write the short stories. I am not so sure that I have the experience to write for the *Daily Pitch*."

"Oh, do not be put off by not having the experience. That is in part what you are there for, to get that experience, first hand. It is the discipline that you need. To be able to produce and turn in, come wet and shine, the right number of words and on time. It is no use to us if your contribution is incomplete when we come to print, no use at all. And this is a daily discipline, but before you express other concerns, it is not a task that will occupy you every hour of every day. You will have the time to write the works for *The Etna*. And if they are well received, perhaps you would try a serialised novel?"

“Before I take a decision, could you explain what you mean when you say that I am not to be put off by not having the experience. I have no experience of disasters of the kind you have described. I am not at all sure that I could write convincingly about each and everyone of them.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mr Braithwaite. “I take these things for granted. Let us say that we have given you shipping disasters as a topic. You will write the copy on all shipping disasters, wherever they occur. You will be our shipping disaster correspondent. Now, to assist you in this, at All Saints we have records and previous articles filed away under the various topics. If it’s a shipping disaster it will have sunk in a storm, run onto the rocks, been sunk by naval action, or pirates, sprung an leak, overturned, or simply capsized. No matter what it is, there will be a record there which, armed with the bare details that you are likely to have, you will use as a model for your account. You will write that as if you had been there and witnessed the dreadful event. Believe me, Miss Mottram, with a little practice you could become most convincing and probably write accounts which are as close to the truth as any are likely to be. But the access to these stories and the material in the files will assist and support you in your fictional writing. Oh, there is one thing further I should mention. You will have to be close at hand to the All Saints works. You will have to live in London.”

“Live in London? Here? That’s impossible!”

“It is essential,” said Mr Braithwaite, patiently. “You have to be able to go into the office every day, usually each afternoon, to cover that day’s reports. That could not possibly be undertaken by someone who is not living right here in London. I think you might find it difficult even to travel in daily from nearby. No, you need to be on the very spot, ready to produce copy at a moment’s notice.”

“Oh dear!” said Ruth, looking crestfallen. “I had never bargained on that.”

“Ah!” said Mr Braithwaite. “It was a point anticipated by your uncle the moment I put to him, in more detail, of course, than I have sketched out today, my suggestion for your future. He realised immediately, as did I, that there is no alternative and, acting on his instructions and with some directions as to where to visit from him, Moss has researched the area and has identified a small suite of rooms managed by a woman with a faultless reputation and situated in a most convenient location. She is a good, trustworthy, God-fearing, upright soul and known to your uncle who has declared that he would be prepared to even entrust his daughter to her, if he had one.”

“My uncle has a habit of saying things like that,” said Ruth lowly. “It is my mother who will object.”

“Well, there can be no reasonable ground for objecting to these rooms. I would be the first to admit that there are those which are dark and damp, crowded or rat-infested, plagued by cockroaches and beetles, overrun by stray cats and rabid dogs, surrounded by drunken brawls or worse, and with the most basic of sanitation, but this is not one. You would be sharing the premises with two genteel spinsters as the only other guests. I doubt that there is a more acceptable or suitable lodging to be found in the whole of London town than Mrs Tucker’s house. You could not be in a better pair of hands.”

“I am sorry,” said Ruth. “I do not wish to sound ungracious, but I had not bargained on this. I had hoped that I might just sell my stories and that would be that.”

“You do desire to make writing your career, do you Miss Mottram?”

“Yes,” said Ruth.

“Well, this then is part of the price. I think you could succeed. I think you could play an important part in the continued success of our main publications and make a name for yourself. Just think, the public waiting for the next tale by Ruth Mottram, or the next instalment of her current novel! I am not one to talk of failure and I would not be saying this if I thought there was no chance of success, but supposing that for some reason we do not see eye to eye or you wish to withdraw your service, or decide this is not the career for you, or that you would rather become a part-time writer, submitting and having published the occasional story to supplement your meagre emoluments from, shall we say, governessing? Well, then we can come to terms and you can return home. None of us would think any the less of you, although I dare say that your uncle might be that little bit put out, might he not?”

Ruth did not know what to say. It seemed to her to be an action that lay beyond her wildest contemplation. Yet, within days, Victoria would be returning from her honeymoon to take up residence not many miles away. If her mother was content for her younger sister to live there, why should she not allow her to live there also? Yet, she could not make up her mind there are then. No matter how loud the voice that was telling her to say "yes", she could hear her mother's objections and felt that, in deference, she was obliged to let her mother have her say before she came to a decision. "I would like a few days to think about it," she said, cautiously. "Would that be acceptable?"

"Of course it would," beamed Mr Braithwaite. "I am sure that Mrs Tucker will be prepared to keep the rooms available for a few days and I will have Moss prevail upon the good woman to ensure that she does. However," he went on, wagging his finger, "not too many days. Shall we say a decision made and communicated to all the parties not later than the end of next week, Miss Mottram?"

"I would hope to be able to confirm matters before then," said Ruth.

"Good, good," said Mr Braithwaite, beaming all the more. "In the interim, if you are willing, I would like to commence our business relationship with the publication in next weeks Etna of one of your stories. I will ask Moss now to draw up a receipt and contract stating what you have written, when it is to be published, and the terms of the remuneration. That will afford you some funding to get you established here, assuming that is the decision that you come to. As I said, I am not a charitable man, but I think you will find me fair. And I will report our conversation to your uncle, if you do not object, as he has asked to be kept informed as to your progress."

"I have no objections," said Ruth. "I think my uncle will be most pleased, but I do not know what my mother will say."

Actually, Ruth knew exactly what her mother would say, and rehearsed most of the lines as she sat in the railway carriage on her journey home. She could even have written them down, word for word, with a reasonable chance of accuracy. Whatever doubts she had herself had been dispelled completely by the time she stepped onto the platform at Swindon and went in search of information concerning the connecting service. Mr Braithwaite was probably right in every particular and this offer did present her with a wonderful opportunity. A regular flow of articles would afford her a regular income whilst she became established. Then, perhaps, she could return to Sutton Minety. Perhaps it would take only two or three years if she worked very hard at it? No, it was not a question of what her decision should be. It was only a matter of how it might be presented to her mother, and of securing her mother's support as she had no wish to leave the cottage that had been her home for some twenty-one years under a cloud.

In that challenge she had few allies. Victoria would not be there and, of late, she had come to realise that she could not depend on her taking her side. In the village the only one who might support her was Matthew Fayrbrother, but his word would carry no weight with her mother, quite the opposite, and it was difficult to see how he could be brought in to stand at her side in any case. There was her Uncle Lancaster. Her mother would listen to her brother and although she did not know where he would stand if presented with the issue, Ruth did suspect that he might be swayed more than a little if he knew the Earl's position in all this. The Earl's position was known, but how much sway would it carry with her mother, assuming she could bring it to bear?

"Go to live in London?" exclaimed Mrs Mottram. "I never heard of such an idea! This is what comes of letting you travel up there alone. I knew your Uncle Lancaster should have accompanied you! He would have not allowed such fanciful ideas to be suggested or placed in your head! Live in London? What would Mr Clauncy say? What would everyone here say? Think of the effect on your reputation, you, a single young woman living alone in a place like London. I never heard of such a thing!"

"I do not care much for what Mr Clauncy or anyone else here says or thinks," said Ruth coldly.

"You may not! You may care little for becoming described as wanton, but I do. I have to go on living here. Do you think that I will continue to be in demand for sewing if my daughter is loose in London?"

"I was hoping, Mother, that with both Victoria and me gone, and with what ever money I can spare to send you, you will not have to be dependent on sewing."

"I will not be bribed, Ruth," said Mrs Mottram. "Others have tried and failed. Make no mistake of that. I do not understand you. I do not know where such ideas come from, a daughter of mine living in London!"

"Victoria will be living in London."

"That is different. She will be living under the protection of her husband."

"So I should marry, should I?" said Ruth, heatedly. "I am sure that contrary to all common lore, I could find a husband!"

"That's nonsense!" said Mrs Mottram.

"In any event, this is all at my other uncle's instigation. It was he who suggested that I pursued writing a career. It was he who arranged the interview and has had the lodgings secured. You could say that I will be under the protection of my uncle."

"That does not make it right!"

"What else would you have me do, Mother?" said Ruth, calmly. "Be a school teacher in a mining village or perhaps go off and live with some strange family as a governess? Perhaps you and Mr Clauncy see me as a potential missionary to the Niger? Surely what I am proposing is no worse than any of these? At least I shall be doing something I enjoy and at which, by all accounts, I am proficient at." Mrs Mottram said nothing, but turned away and went out into the kitchen. Ruth followed her, determined to press home what she perceived as an advantage. "And I would be joining the staff of a respected firm of publishers. It is not any penny dreadful, the Daily Pitch. I am sure that uncle would have not approached them were they not above reproach."

"What did your uncle tell you concerning the purpose of our visit to see him?" said Mrs Mottram.

"Nothing!" said Ruth, surprised by the change in subject.

"Well, I can tell you I had hoped that it would help find a future for you. But it appears to have fired back on me. Victoria is swept away into a marriage I never could have foreseen, and now you -."

"Oh, Mother! It is not that bad!"

"But it is bad! It is London, Ruth! It would be bad enough were it Bristol or Birmingham, but London! It cannot be right for a young woman to be living in such a place alone."

"I shall not be alone. I will be sharing the house with the landlady and her other lodgers who are two spinsters who, I understand, teach at a local school. I am sure if you were to ask Uncle Lancaster or the Earl, they would both be of the same mind. Why, I believe the rooms are large enough even for you to come and live with me!"

"No, Ruth. I could not do that. I do not think I would ever want to visit London, not even for a day. It is a wicked, sinful, place full of wicked, sinful, people who prey on one another and any innocent that falls into their grasp."

"Well. Mother. If such people do exist in London, and I must say that I never saw so many churches as I did in what little I saw of it, I am sure that I can keep from falling into their grasp. Indeed, my main concern is not for me, but for you, left here on your own."

Mrs Mottram looked out into the garden, at the small vegetable plot which had been faithfully turned, sown, and harvested for those past twenty or more summers. It was all coming to an end, an untidy end, an end which was the opening to an unpredictable and uncertain future. But no matter how much she regretted all that had come to pass and the loss of both her daughters which now seemed inevitable, she knew that it was all of her doing. She had agreed to and written that first letter to her brother-in-law. She had taken her daughters off at a day's notice to live at Hazleton Court Hall. None of what had happened would have happened but for her. Above all, given that her primary motive in all this was to place Ruth into a position somewhere, to allow her to go and live with a family of complete

strangers, how could she maintain an honest resistance to what was now proposed for her daughter? She was snared in a trap of her own making. "I will have to think about it," she said, at length.

Their conversation was still on Ruth's mind when she climbed the stairs to her room later that evening and went to sit at the writing desk. "Well, Uncle," she addressed the image, "I have taken a first step. Have I now the courage to tread further along the path?" She composed two letters, written in the light of a solitary candle. One was to her uncle giving him a full account of what had transpired that day. The second was to Mr Braithwaite and, despite her mother's misgivings, it was in acceptance of his offer and seeking guidance as to when he wished her to take up her duties. She then toyed with the idea of writing of a third which would have rejected his offer, but beyond such a letter was nothing but the dark which lay all around her at the fringe of the candle's reach. It remained unwritten.

She placed the two letters carefully to one side on the desk, ready to be sent on the morning. It no longer mattered what arguments or threats her mother brought to bear. She had taken her decision. "That is it, Uncle," she said to the image shortly before the candle was extinguished. "There is no turning back. I have no option but to go forward and to London."