

Chapter Thirteen

A Move to London

Ruth received support in the form of a letter of encouragement from her uncle a couple of days later. He had heard from Mr Braithwaite who had been most complimentary about the stories she had left with him, and who had set out the reservations that Ruth had expressed about having to live and work in London. The Earl extolled her to take what was, in his view, a very good opportunity and one of a kind that was not likely to re-occur. There was also a brief note to her mother in the same envelope which advised her not to be concerned as he had received encouraging reports concerning the house where it was proposed Ruth would lodge. In any event, Benjamin Braithwaite could be relied upon to keep an eye on her daughter.

It three full weeks after the first interview that Ruth boarded the train that would take her to Swindon. If she could have done, she would have parted from her mother under happier circumstances, but Mrs Mottram was not to be moved from the position she had adopted concerning London. Ruth could go and live there. Anything bad that arose as a consequence she would have brought on her own head. Her thoughts were tinged with sadness as she waited for the Paddington train to arrive. It seemed that Ruth had now unintentionally alienated both her sister and her mother. Her one hope was that in time she would be able to repair their relationships and she resolved to write regularly to them both as if nothing had happened. Of course, Victoria, now back from her honeymoon, would be so surprised when she learnt of all that had happened whilst she had been away. Perhaps once she was established she would become socially acceptable and in demand. Victoria would then be happy to have her as a sister!

At the appointed hour she presented herself at the City office of Braithwaite & Sunbury and was shown by Moss into Mr Braithwaite's office. He was beaming, delighted to see her. "There were one or two moments when I wondered if we would see this day," he said. "But I thought the writer would win through. Now, first things first. What luggage have you brought with you and is there much to come?"

"I have brought all that I can carry. I sent on my trunk and writing desk a couple of days ago to the address you sent me. I do not know whether they have arrived."

"We had better find out," said Mr Braithwaite. "Moss! We have need of a cab to take us to All Saints."

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed Ruth as they crossed Blackfriars Bridge. "Is that the Thames? I never imagined that a river could be that wide!"

"Yes, it is the Thames!" said Mr Braithwaite, laughing. "I must apologise for not having pointed out some of the sights, but you will get to see them all in time."

"And which way is the sea? I have never seen the sea."

"That is another omission to be corrected, then. It is that way, beyond the railway bridges. Perhaps we could arrange a day trip for you to Southend, or Margate or Brighton. They are all very fashionable. Now, upstream is Somerset House and Waterloo Bridge. Beyond that, round the bend, is Whitehall Palace, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. They are all on the North bank, but we have to go along the South bank virtually as far as Waterloo Station. If you are lucky you may see one of the London Tramways Company cars. We had chaos around here when the lines were installed. Unfortunately the tram car will not be of any great assistance to you in your daily journey to the office, but as you will see, it is not at all far. But we will call in at Mrs Tucker's first so that you can make her acquaintance and see your rooms. And, most important of all, you have a paved walkway all the way! Then I will take you to the works and you will meet Mr Spruce. A very important

man is Mr Spruce, but he is prepared to be your mentor. You will learn a great deal from him, a great deal."

The cab pulled up in a narrow, drab, street lined with a motley of brick and stone buildings. A small group of grimy children stood on the pavement and watched as Ruth descended from the cab. Beyond, standing in the open door way of a plastered building, was a large plump woman, wearing an equally large apron and a mop cap from beneath which a chubby face, looking slightly concerned, peered out. "Ah, Mrs Tucker is there, I see," said Mr Braithwaite.

"Miss Mottram?" she said, rubbing her hands on the apron and shooing the children away. "We have been expecting you as your trunk and furniture arrived this morning. I took the liberty of having Bob take it up to your room on account that I have never once not yet had a lady who, upon seeing one of my rooms, did not declare it to be the absolute perfection she sought. And Bob can assist you now. Bob! Bob! Where is that boy? Not here, clearly, when he is needed!"

"I have very little luggage with me," said Ruth, "and having carried it all the way from Sutton Minety it will not harm me to convey it a little further."

"That's as may be," said Mrs Tucker, looking around her anxiously. "But fetching and carrying is as how he earns his board and keep and he will go hungry if he is not here to perform that said fetching and carrying. Bob!"

"Perhaps Miss Mottram could see her rooms, Mrs Tucker?" said Mr Braithwaite.

"Of course! You shall see them this very minute and as I said I have never had a lady what said she was disappointed. I only takes in genteel ladies, Miss Mottram. I has two, Miss Cramm and Miss Stern, who you will meet at dinner this very evening. They are teachers, both. That's all that's here. Mine is a respectable house and known hereabouts for its respectability."

"My mother will be pleased to hear that from me," said Ruth, following her into the hallway and up the stairs each one of which creaked in protest under Mrs Tucker's weight.

No-one knew how old was the house in which Mrs Tucker lived. It was held that it was timber framed which might have been the explanation for the fact that none of the floors showed any inclination to remain either level or horizontal. There were days on which the windows would refuse to open, or doors would not be shut. There were gaps, for they were of too great a magnitude to be described as cracks, which opened up between the floor and the skirting boards, gaps that had been known to consume coinage, cutlery, even items of minor jewellery, which had the misfortune to be dropped and then never seen again. Those who were aware of the house's appetite for small objects would declare that Mrs Tucker would probably come into a fortune if it was once demolished.

The stairs stretched upwards for three floors. On the ground floor was a communal sitting room and a dining room while Mrs Tucker occupied the whole of the first, but the rooms on the other two were divided into three unequal suites and let out to her genteel ladies. Ruth's room, she explained, was on the third floor but it would be ideal on account of it not overlooking the street.

Before they reached the first landing a short, red-haired, lad who Ruth would have aged at between twelve and thirteen, flushed and puffing hard as if he had just delivered an express to the nearby station, appeared at the bottom of the stairs and called after Mrs Tucker in a thin, reed-like, voice.

"Why!" she said. "Here is Bob now that we no longer have any need of him! Nevertheless, he shall learn who you are in the event you shall have need of him. Bob! This is Miss Mottram who is come to live here and work at the printers. You shall attend to her and run her messages as though it were for me. D'you understand?"

The youth nodded his head furiously. "Young Bob here is an orphan-boy. London is full of them. He's been erranding for me and my ladies for all of five years. Now, I am trusting that you will think highly of the room. Mr Braithwaite tells me that you needs peace and quiet and somewhere to work where you will not be disturbed, and I tells him that I have the very room, as I say, at the back of the house which could not be better suited to meet the needs of a writer had it been made for that purpose. There are some who would not relish the view, but I says

to Mr Braithwaite that if you are a writer of mystery and such you may be inspired, so as to speak, by the overlooking of a graveyard.”

“A graveyard?” said Ruth, feeling slightly chilled.

“That’s how the room comes to be so restful and quiet. I am trusting that you are not of a morbid nature? I told Mr Braithwaite that I wouldn’t be putting anyone in that room as is of a morbid nature.”

“Very true, Mrs Tucker,” said Mr Braithwaite. “Those were your very words.”

“Only there was this young man, fifteen, twenty years ago, in them days when I would take young men under my roof for lodging, but not any more, not since the passing of my husband. He was of a morbid nature, this young man, and one day he is found hanging from a hook in the ceiling. All very private, of course. Not like Tyburn. But he had succumbed to the morbidity, not that it happened in this house. No, for some reason it was at Mrs Berry’s but she has departed now and her daughter married a collier from Newcastle. It was that as preyed on the young man’s morbidity, I fear. Ah, here we are!”

After some initial resistance, the door was eased open to reveal a moderately large room which Mrs Tucker declared was the sitting room. Indeed, Ruth would have accepted that it might have been passed off as such as there were a pair of sad armed chairs, a well worn rug stretched across the uneven linoleum, faded damask curtains at the windows, a small, polished table and two carver chairs, but what caught Ruth’s attention immediately was the writing desk which was standing by one of the two windows with some folded paper wedged under one leg. “We thought that was the most suitable spot for you to have it,” said Mrs Tucker, “but it needed propping. Did it need propping at home?”

“No,” said Ruth. “Not that I was aware of.”

“This is the bedroom through here,” said Mrs Tucker, opening one of the two other doors that led from the room and revealing a bed, a dark wardrobe, and a small, brown, chest-of-drawers on which was an off-white basin and jug. “The other room could also be used as a bedroom as I hear that your mother might come to stay with you.”

“That is unlikely,” said Ruth, moving over to the writing desk. From the window she could see a grey, stone, church and the graveyard, dark and already shaded from the afternoon sun.

“You will both note, both of you, how quiet and peaceful it is,” said Mrs Tucker. “You would not believe that you are but a stone’s throw from the bustle of Waterloo station!”

“Very true,” said Mr Braithwaite, “and very apt as Miss Mottram, coming as she does from the countryside, is not accustomed to the noise of the Metropolis.”

“And you won’t be getting much in the way of disturbance from the graveyard neither. I reckons they’s as buried all they’s going to bury in there and it is locked as tight as a prison cell at night. There’s not many as will scramble over the railings, not to get in, nor to get out! Now, what did I tell you, Miss Mottram? Could you honestly say that this is not to your total satisfaction?”

Ruth, if she was honest with herself, felt that the room fell far short in its appointment of her bedroom in Meadowview Cottage. There was grime on the ceiling above the fireplace and the places in the room where candles or lamps had been stood. Indeed, the fireplace looked small and mean as if it never had any intention of providing heat to a room of that size. And the whole room, in fact the whole building, and the street outside, was permeated with a smell which was neither sweet nor sour, but was one which she thought most unpleasant. Yet, in contrast, there was a small posy of freshly cut flowers in a china vase on the table, and clean white linen on the bed. “I think it will be admirable,” said Ruth.

“I would also declare it to be admirable. It has everything a writer could wish for. It is conveniently placed for the office yet it is a place where Miss Mottram can work in peace and without disturbance to her thoughts. Yes, it is admirable.”

Mrs Tucker must have seen Ruth’s nose twitch as she suddenly announced that the smell was due to the proximity of the river, but that it was something that one rapidly became accustomed to. Ruth said that she hoped that was so as they descended to the street once more. “Now,” said Mr Braithwaite, pausing at the front door, “we can do one of two things. We can guide you now to the office or we can leave you here for a half hour to unpack and to

begin to settle in. In terms of taking up your journalistic duties they can start tomorrow. Would you like me to return for you in thirty minutes?"

"Would that be acceptable?" said Ruth, looking at her landlady.

"Acceptable? Lord bless me! You are free to come and go as are any of my ladies between the hour I draws the bolts in the morning and the time that I pulls them again. I normally bars the front door at eight o'clock of the evening, considering as I do that any respectable woman, unless she has somewhere particular to go, will be in her room by that time of night."

"There may be occasions when Miss Mottram finds herself obliged to stay at the office after that hour," said Mr Braithwaite. "Putting the paper to press is the master of our discipline, and that can be at ten o'clock, or even later. And you need not concern yourself about walking home at that time of night," he said, turning to Ruth. "Mr Spruce or one of the printers will always accompany you."

"On the assumption that such occasions will be restricted to the barest minimum, and in recognition of the fact that those in the literary world cannot always keep to the same hours as ordinary God-fearing folk, you shall have a key to the door and I shall not throw the bolts until I am satisfied that you are within."

Back up in her new room Ruth unpacked and positioned the image of her uncle in its place on the writing desk. She resolved that she would write to both him and her mother that evening to inform them of her safe arrival and to recount the better details of her lodgings. She would write to Victoria, too, but a different letter, and one that could wait a few days.

Mr Braithwaite returned promptly on the half hour and suggested that they walked to the printing works as it would help her to learn the way, not that it was far, he assured her once again. It took a full ten minutes of twists and turns, corners and short alleyways, of squeezing past people or diligently stepping off pavements to avoid them, before she found herself standing before the large sign which proclaimed the "All Saints Printing Press" in fading paint above a modest, half-glazed door. Inside was a series of small offices, each separated by a glazed partition and each housing two or three desks. Some were occupied, the occupants bending, head down, over the article they were preparing for that evening's press.

"We do not have a large staff," said Mr Braithwaite. "I will introduce you to them briefly, and in particular, as I mentioned, to Mr Spruce. He is our City Editor and he will take you under his wing. He is also our leading writer, although I should make it plain that I act as the paper's Editor. As I think I said earlier, you will be able to learn a great amount from him, indeed, you could not have a better apprenticeship in the art of journalistic writing. He is by far the most experienced man working on the Daily Pitch and he is undoubtedly the most influential. I would go even further and say that he is one of the most influential men in the City of London, given the power he can wield with his pen."

"I think I fear him already," said Ruth.

Mr Spruce was found in the last of the offices, sat behind a small desk. "Ah!" he said, standing and indicating that she should sit at the desk opposite his. "So this is the famous Miss Mottram, is it?"

He was not as Ruth would have imagined him to be. He was short, dark-haired with a beard, perhaps in his early forties, she thought. She was struck with his striking blue eyes and his firm mouth which he would occasionally bend into a smile, although this was only when he permitted such a change in his countenance. "Hardly famous," she said.

"Famous indeed," he went on, holding a pen between his hands. "Your fame has preceded you, as has that of your uncle. Now, there is a successful man of commerce. If you are as successful with the pen as he has been in business we will all sit in your shade."

"I know little of my uncle's business successes," said Ruth, not knowing quite how to respond to this man.

"They are legion. Your uncle is recognised for his shrewdness and his honesty in the business he conducts, not like some of the charlatans that crawl out from under the paving stones in the City each and every day."

"So I am led to understand," said Ruth, beginning to be made to feel uncomfortable by the man's familiarity when talking of her relations.

“And if you are Earl Mottram’s niece, not that I am suggesting that you are not, you must also be related to young Roger de Malle Mottram and his pretty and entertaining wife that he found in the country.”

“I am,” she said, coldly. She railed at the words he used and the tone in which he said them, but as he was to be her mentor she thought it would be a poor tactic to cross swords with him at their first meeting, although she had already started to compile a list of what she might, in time, teach him. “As you are so very well informed, you will be aware that Roger is a distant cousin of mine, and his wife who you already find both pretty and entertaining, is my sister.”

“The devil she is!” exclaimed Mr Spruce, permitting a smile. “Then you may well be of use to me and the Daily Pitch!”

“I do not see how.”

“I like to keep a close eye on young Mr de Malle Mottram and his business venture. I would like to know what he and his associates are really up to and a little privileged information, direct from the source in a manner of speaking, would go a long way.”

“I trust you are not suggesting that I should betray a confidence?”

“Ah, scruples! How pleasant and refreshing to encounter a young lady with scruples, a commodity noted for its rarity now-a-days, particularly amongst your ladies. I can tell that you have not been raised in the salons of London society where at the very most a sovereign will suffice to break open the most intimate of confidences.”

“I trust that is not the case,” said Ruth, feeling that she disliked this man all the more with every word he uttered.

“Ah, but sadly it is so, and it is as well that it is so. One cardinal rule for journalism, Miss Mottram, is to search out and determine the truth, and to be able to recognise it as the truth when faced with it, no matter how disillusioned you may become in the process. In doing so, it may be necessary to use every subterfuge at your disposal. The truth always justifies the means. And normally there is a means, even if it is unpalatable, but I have long ago ceased to think well of my fellow men.”

“Do they then not say of you that you are no better than the next?” she asked, sharply.

“I care little for what they say of me as a man, Miss Mottram. That signifies very little beside the respect I command as a journalist. After all, that is what you are seeking as a writer, is it not? You are not asking people to think well of you in your own right, but are saying think well of you as a writer and read your books!”

“I would hope that I would not be corrupted in the process.”

“I am not talking of corruption, Miss Mottram,” he said, leaning back in his chair and placing his hands behind his head. “But you will see and hear it all when you work here, every aspect of life, good, bad, beautiful, ugly, God fearing and Satanic. You may not write about it all, not every aspect of the society that surrounds us, but it will be added experience. And you must find some goal in life to aim for, something to lift you above the gutters and sewers, the slime of everyday existence. Perhaps your wish to become a writer will serve you in that respect. Hang on to it, otherwise you run the risk of being dragged down with everyone else.”

“You portray an alarming picture,” she said, thinking she did not understand precisely what he meant.

“I can illustrate it by observing that many journalists end up as drunkards, at least the men do. I cannot say what fate befalls the women because they are exceptionally rare in this business, but it is probably bad. But to return to where I was heading before our diversion into philosophy, let me assure you, and please take my word for it as it is important that you realise this from the outset, that the very vast majority of the people you will meet are either corrupt or corruptible. As you wish to become a writer, they are seized with the desire to become rich, and most pursue that aim, without any regard to the price that they and others have to pay for it to be achieved. There are exceptions. There are a precious few who swim against the tide and try to remain true and honest. In the City I can identify twelve such men, perhaps, your uncle amongst them, but they are a dying breed, the last of a race of knights who are gradually falling prey to the rapacity of others.”

“And you, Mr Spruce, do you count yourself amongst this twelve, or are you a thirteenth disciple?”

“I see I am going to enjoy working with you, Miss Mottram,” he said, laughing. “In all honesty, I would like to think myself as being there, but I am afraid that I can never be certain that I am another of the faith or whether I will ultimately succumb and be cast into the Inferno. They say that every man has his price. I fear that I may simply not have not been tempted with, for me, a desirable enough thing thus far.”

“Well, I am certain that I have not, and nor has my uncle. Indeed, I would like to think that the vast majority of gentlemen are of the same mind as me.”

“Then, here in London at least, you stand to be sadly disillusioned, I can assure you. Sometimes the price is very high. Sometimes it is very low. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, the corruption is internal and self-imposed. Vanity is the worst. Why did your sister marry her cousin?”

“Why? Why, because she loves him!”

“And it was not vanity? Beware in particular the actions of those who obey their own rigid creed. They will betray and denounce others because their interpretation of their creed demands that of them. You have only to read your history book to see what intolerance and religious persecution have achieved over the centuries. It is all corruption, Miss Mottram. But I am digressing into morality now, and almost into theology, and neither is my field. I would like to get back to where we started and your brother-in-law.”

“Yes?” said Ruth, cautiously, thinking that she might be at risk of being corrupted by this man, yet fearing also that he might have knowledge that would threaten her sister.

“I need to know what the foundation is for the venture that he and, I assume, some associates are pursuing. Do you know anything of it?”

“No, I do not,” she said, her heart quickening slightly as this was slightly less than the truth. Perhaps this was how people became corrupted? “And even if I did, I doubt that I would understand it fully.”

“Oh, I doubt that, Miss Mottram. You are quite intelligent, for a woman. I like that. Well, let me tell you a little of what I already know. There is this enormous venture which is referred to in the City as The Eldorado. Basically, it is a plan to build a railway complex virtually the length and breadth of South America. This mysterious consortium, which appears to be headed by your sister’s husband, have put out a prospectus which talks in glowing terms of opening up the jungle and forests and extracting the riches of the area. It talks of gold, copper, iron ore, manganese, timber in abundance. It talks of construction work having started here and there, of goods and materials purchased, and so on. We have seen prospectuses like this before. I could line the walls with them. They all came to nothing except a considerable loss for those who were gullible enough to invest in them.”

“I am sorry, Mr Spruce, but I do not fully understand you. Are you saying that Roger’s proposal, this venture that he is involved in, is a fraud?”

“No. That’s where it all becomes very difficult. The prospectus is very detailed, with information on orders placed, shipping manifestos, bills of lading, but all of this is happening on the other side of the World. So no-one here really knows what is really happening there, and no-one here is likely to go out to see. Or shall I say, normally no-one is likely to go out there. The usual practice is to seek corroboration from a number of leading figures in the countries involved and their statements, true or false, genuine or bogus, are published with the prospectus. They can get away with that because who will know whether Maria don José is the chief magistrate in Alimantare. But not your brother-in-law’s consortium. They have chosen a man who is said to be prominent and well respected in South America to endorse their venture. What is more, he is here in this country so that he can be cross-examined, except they are not even inviting that. What they are doing is to state that they sending him back to carry out his inspection early next year, and that he will report his findings at a public meeting upon his return. Now, all of this is quite extraordinary.”

“I am still not sure that I fully understand you,” said Ruth, slowly. “Are you saying that all the claims that expense has been incurred or work carried out in these prospectuses you talk of are untrue? That none of it has been done?”

“In some cases, yes. In other cases a little of the stakeholders’ money is spent in the procurement of goods and services but with no intention of taking the project to completion. But in the case of The Eldorado, I simply do not know. Let me elaborate. Normally, as the venture is being put forward a number of important-sounding, usually titled, people who are held in high regard are approached and asked to endorse it. I need not stray into the incentives that may be offered, but the names of the backers are then put about before the shares are offered to the public at large. And the public at large think that it must be sound if those people are backing it.”

“And in Roger’s case?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all! Instead he has stayed very tight-lipped about who the backers are, but there must be some. Someone must have put up the money to get him this far. His silence could mean one of two things. Either there is no backing and there is little or no money invested in the venture. Or there are backers but they wish to remain anonymous for the present, perhaps to keep the stock value low? I know that it is not possible to buy into the venture at present, and that is unusual. Is it all genuine, I ask myself? I need to know.”

“I do not know, I am afraid,” she said, and bit her lip at uttering such an unguarded statement. She should have said that it was genuine, but the comments made by her Uncle Lancaster had sown some doubts. However, Mr Spruce did not appear to appreciate the indiscretion.

“What does your uncle think?”

“My uncle?”

“Earl Mottram. Is he backing this venture?”

“I do not know the answer to either of your questions and if I did know, I would not be prepared to break the confidence under which the knowledge was entrusted to me.”

“Not even if it was a fraud?”

“I have said that I do not know, Mr Spruce. That should suffice.”

“Is it possible that your brother-in-law is founding the venture on the strength of your sister’s expected inheritance? It would make ideal collateral.”

“What inheritance?”

“*The inheritance*,” said the City Editor.

“I am sorry,” said Ruth, feeling her heart quickening again and sensing that she must be blushing, “but I really do not know what you are talking about. Victoria expects no inheritance, none whatsoever.”

“You really do not know, do you?” he said, studying her closely. “Well, Miss Mottram, there has been a rumour circulating the City of late that your sister is named in Earl Mottram’s Will as his main beneficiary and that she will inherit his fortune when he dies.”

“I cannot verify that,” said Ruth, her heart now pounding. “I have no knowledge of the terms of my uncle’s Will.”

“There is another rumour that surfaced only a few days ago, that your uncle, the Earl, is seriously, possibly terminally ill, with poisoning of the blood as a result of an infection in his foot.”

“That’s nonsense!” she said, hotly.

“It is said that two leading London physicians have been sent for. If he should die, your sister will become Lady Mottram and a very rich woman indeed.”

“What can I say?” said Ruth. “It is all nonsense!”

“Ah, but is it *all* nonsense? Some rumours are pure fabrication. Others are more akin to myths and have an element of truth at the core. There are other things which have been put about which give some credibility to at least an element of these rumours.”

“Well, I cannot imagine what they could be to lend credibility to such outrageous stories! I can assure you that I saw my uncle only a few weeks ago and that although he did have a bad foot, and he did have a fall, he was virtually back on his feet. Since the day I left his house he has corresponded with me regularly and made no mention of any further difficulties. Does this sound to you like a man who is terminally ill?”

“Some rumours are misinformation, put about deliberately to mislead. I will never publish a rumour until I am certain as to which it is, and in that respect you are being most helpful. But you have no idea as to who will benefit from your uncle’s Will?”

“No. I am sure that I do not know,” she said. “Nor am I particular concerned having no expectations in that direction.” It was true that she had heard rumours concerning Roger in connection with the Will and given the relationship between her sister and uncle, it was not impossible he would recognise her position, but she was not prepared to divulge anything to this man.

“I see. Let me put the question a different way. Can you categorically state that your sister is not to inherit?”

Ruth caught her breath. Perhaps this man had heard of the exceptional treatment her sister had received during their visit to Hazleton Court Hall. Her uncle had made no secret about his temporary adoption of her as his daughter. Then there was the rumour that Matthew Fayrbrother had told her beside the boating lake. That could also have found its way to this man’s ears. When she thought of it, such an outcome was not inconceivable. And if it was a rumour, or if she could think of it in those terms, so could have Roger. This thought cast a small cloud in her mind over the motives she assumed he had for proposing to Victoria. “No,” she said. “I cannot.”

“Cannot or will not?” he said, smugly.

“I cannot,” she repeated, defensively. “I do know that my uncle thinks very highly of my sister and she won favour in his eyes sufficient for him to make a generous settlement upon her wedding, but more than that I do not know.”

“No doubt he has done or will do the same for you?”

“No, he has not and will not, Mr Spruce,” Ruth said indignantly. “Again you are mistaken.”

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. “Well, then, tell me this, just so that we understand one another. You are here with no subsidy, trying to live entirely by your own labours and with no external assistance?”

“Quite so. I intend to live entirely by the fruit of my labours,” she said, thinking immediately that her words had the ring of Mr Clauncy about them, and thus regretted saying them.

“I see,” said Mr Spruce, leaning forwards and resting his chin on his hand. “Am I in danger of misjudging you? I will not comment on whether I think that is right or wrong, sensible or silly, bearing in mind you are the niece of one of the richest men in the Country, but you have my hearty wish that you meet with good fortune, as you will have need of it. As for my part, you will have my entire support and what I can teach or show you, I will. But be warned! The road you are setting out upon will be hard, especially in the first few years. Let me go back to the matter of your sister’s inheritance and run the risk of over-trading upon your patience. It is important to determine whether or not it is the truth. I take great care and pride in ensuring that what I print in my City column is the truth and nothing but the truth. That is how I have earned an unparalleled reputation in the world of journalism. When people read my column, be they business men or bakers, they can place complete reliance upon what they read there. I would not publish a rumour, no matter how attractive it might be, but were it to be substantiated, I would, and in doing so it is no longer a rumour but has become fact by virtue of appearing in the Spruce column. I could be of great assistance to your sister’s husband in this respect, providing I know the truth about this venture.”

“I am afraid that again, Mr Spruce, I do not understand the reason for this prolonged interrogation of me concerning my family. I trust there is more to journalism than this!”

“I am sorry, Miss Mottram. I had not intended our initial meeting to assume the appearance of an interrogation. Do accept my apologies, but allow me to clarify the point I was about to make. At some point your brother-in-law will come to the City and offer stock in The Eldorado. At that point his success will be entirely dependent upon the confidence he has built up in the venture, nothing else. That confidence is based upon a number of substantiated facts and a wealth of rumour and speculation. Now, if it were known that his wife was the heiress to the Mottram fortune -”

“Which she is not!”

“Which she is not, you say,” said Mr Spruce, thoughtfully.

“If you were to print anything, you should print that!” she said, hotly.

“That might be most damaging for your sister and her husband were I to print it. It might result in their entire ruin as it could destroy all confidence in the venture quite regardless of the truth. If I say it, Miss Mottram, it is believed!”

“Perhaps you should print nothing, then,” she said lowly.

“Clearly, I will not be able to print anything in the immediate future,” he said. “But can we have an understanding? If you hear the truth, concerning this or any other related matter, will you tell me? Remember, you are part of the team working on The Pitch. The truth, Miss Mottram, that is what we seek. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I will consider it, if I hear anything,” said Ruth. “But I think it is already in your possession.”