

Chapter Fourteen

An Article is Published and the Consequences

Ruth found this initial meeting with the City Editor, her future mentor, very disturbing and when she returned to her lodging she was already wondering whether she had made a mistake and that, perhaps for none of the right reasons, her mother had been correct. Parts of the conversation remained in her mind for days afterwards, but she vowed she would wait before she took any steps that she might later regret. Mr Braithwaite had advanced her what seemed to be a princely sum, which enabled her to pay for the first month of her lodgings, equip herself with a small stock pile of paper, together with an ample supply of pens and ink. Half of what was left she sent to her mother, explaining at length exactly how the money had been earned and accounting for that which had been dispersed.

Her mother replied rather coldly saying, politely, that she was pleased that she had found reasonable employment and lodgings, and asking if she had heard from Victoria. Ruth replied that she had not, but having her sister's address wrote her a short note saying that she was in London and that she would explain why when they were able to meet. She received no reply and two days later she received a further letter from her mother saying that she had not heard from Victoria since the communication from Switzerland and could Ruth remind her sister when she saw her of this omission. That letter was followed at a short interval by a further letter to say her mother now had heard from Victoria, who explained that she had been very busy entertaining and dancing and that this life in London, whilst it was enjoyable, was very full and tiring. At this point Ruth ceased to be concerned about not having herself received any communication from her sister. Clearly she was too busy to write but, she thought, in time, when she had an opportunity, she would.

It was two days after the first meeting with Mr Spruce, and a number of discarded or rejected drafts, that Ruth's first article appeared in the Daily Pitch and under her name. Mr Spruce had been strict as to the quality of what she produced, and its length, but declared that she learnt quickly and anticipated that it would not be many weeks before she was writing totally unsupervised. There was a great deal to learn and Ruth spent many hours delving into and working through the files and papers held on the topics that were allocated to her. Asked by Mr Spruce at the beginning of the second week whether she was enjoying her work, she gave him an unequivocal "yes".

There was no need to send a copy of her first article to her uncle as he had left instructions that the paper should be posted to him daily so that he could follow his niece's progress. But Ruth carefully cut it out and sent it to her mother as further evidence of her progress and to remove any doubts that might have been lingering in her mind, or that of Mr Clauncy, as to her daughter's activities. She received a reply which contained no praise other than the comment that her mother was surprised that Ruth was able to write with such authority on so remote a subject.

That first article was noticed, also, by others. "Look at this!" said Roger as he sat down in a dim coffee shop beside Charing Cross station.

"The Daily Pitch?" said Matthew Fayrbrother. "I cannot say that I would normally read it. Are you looking at the Spruce column? What has he been saying about us? Something complementary I trust."

"I wish he would or could be persuaded to," said Roger. "No, it's this article here about, and I quote, a most fearsome and frightful storm that struck the Hebrides causing much distress and woeful loss including the taking of three lives."

"A storm in the Hebrides? Why should we be concerned at the blowing-away of a few crofts?"

“We are not. It is not what happened, it is who is credited with the writing of it! And is not it somewhat unusual to find the name of the correspondent, especially if that correspondent is still new at her trade, at the top of a column? I mean, look at the paper. Who else gets any credit but this one?”

“It says the writer is Ruth Mottram!” said Matthew. “Surely not our Ruth Mottram? I mean, how can this be? Is she here, in London?”

“It is none other than cousin Ruth, fresh up from the depths of the countryside and already earning her fame.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, it is an object lesson to me to read the letters addressed to Victoria before I burn them. One came yesterday postmarked SW1. It must have been from Ruth.”

“Ruth is here, in London?” Matthew repeated.

“I arranged some discreet enquiries at the newspaper’s offices. It was too risky to attend myself in case I encountered her, but I sent a man I use for these things. He was able to confirm that a young lady, who is none other than the niece of Earl Mottram, started work there this week under the guidance of none other than our Mr Spruce! And I learnt a little more. The said young lady has taken lodgings in Lambeth, somewhere in the vicinity of Upper Stamford Street.”

“Ruth, here in London? It is hard to come to terms with. How has it come about? Has your uncle purchased the paper? Is that it?”

“Not according to my enquiries. I understand that he effected the introduction and the rest is a result of the stories that she had already written and brought with her.”

“And this is not bad,” said Matthew, scanning the account that Ruth had written. “But does this present us with a problem? She is bound to want to see her sister.”

“Indeed she is. No doubt the letter asked as much.”

“Are you intercepting all her mail? It is an offence, you know, to tamper with the Queen’s post.”

“I am not tampering with the Queen’s post,” said Roger. “All the mail is properly delivered to the house. It is just that it is brought to me in the first place and I have no intention of allowing my wife to have a lively correspondence with either her mother or sister, or anyone else. I will decide when she shall write to her mother, and I will be the sole arbiter as to what she says.”

“But what if her mother writes to Ruth and asks her to visit your wife?”

“Which she will do. Then I may allow Victoria to meet with her but, again, only if I am able to control what passes between them. I certainly do not want Victoria to arouse interest by making a reference to the deeds she is being asked to sign.”

“And what will Angelo say if he learns she is here?”

“Fortunately he does not read the Pitch. I do not think it would be wise for him to know that his angel is in town, not just yet.”

“What do you propose, then?” said Matthew.

“The first thing is to effect a meeting between two sisters. I do not see it as being an affectionate meeting. Victoria will say exactly the right things about our venture. If she does not she will find it the worse for her. I will not try for her to cover too much ground in this meeting as that might arouse suspicion, but if the balance is right and if we can rely on Ruth to convey the information she gleans back to Spruce, this coincidence may be turned to our advantage.”

“It is all a little risky, isn’t it?”

“It is all more than a little risky when you consider what we are doing under phase two at this very moment,” said Roger, darkly. “But that is going to plan and so will this.”

“Is it having any effect as yet? I would not expect any change to be significant, but once it takes hold the decline is rapid and irreversible.”

“And difficult to detect.”

“And difficult to detect,” confirmed Matthew. “You must let me know when you wish to start phase three as I need a couple of weeks notice in order to contact by the

colleague. The substance then has to be administered within three days, so we have to get it right.”

“I will let you know,” said Roger. “Certainly it will not be before the meeting between my wife and her sister.”

“Wouldn’t it be more sensible if I were to meet Ruth? I know exactly what to say.”

“Do you really want to?”

“Not really.”

“Then we will stay with the plan. I think Victoria will have more credibility as Ruth is likely to believe anything that her sister tells her, within reason. In addition, it may be to our advantage if she does not know that you are in London, certainly if she is not aware of our connection. On balance, she should remain ignorant of your presence for the present.”

“You are saying that I should not meet her?”

“Not unless you really want to see her. You are not thinking of pre-empting Angelo, are you?”

“Good gracious, no!

“In that case, Ruth should meet no-one other than her sister and, of course, me. She should not know that you are living here just over the other side of the river. And she should not be permitted to come into contact with Angelo if we can help it. We may have to even take measures to prevent them discussing matters together. No, Ruth needs to be isolated as that way she is less of a threat to us. There may then come a time when it will be to our advantage to for you to meet her.”

“And funds? Are we going to have sufficient?”

“I think so for the time being, thanks to my uncle. The amount that he gave Victoria as a dowry plus the income he has settled upon her may just about suffice until we can get our hands on the capital. In fact even that would be unnecessary were we in a position to produce the Will. Lucy is under instructions to keep her eyes and ears open. Goodness knows where my wretched uncle has hidden it, but we will find it, between us. The problem at the moment is persuading Lucy to be patient and to proceed with the plan slowly. I am sure that if she were left to her own devices she would have given him the whole of the powder at once!”

“That would never do, not unless we could get my father to attend on him and sign the Death Certificate.”

“Oh, that would be poetic justice if we did, but I fear that your father’s reputation might be our undoing. We cannot risk arousing Lancaster’s suspicions. No, it will be better if we proceed slowly and let the poison take its course. Then we can trust the doctors to come to the obvious conclusion, that it is on account of his leg.”

“A straight forward case of septicaemia.”

“Just so. It is agreed, then? I will deal with Ruth and Victoria, we will keep Angelo away from both of them, and you will stay in the background until it is necessary for you to emerge. Are we agreed?”

“We are!” said Matthew.

It was not many days later that Ruth arrived back at her lodgings to find Mrs Tucker in a most agitated state. “A carriage came!” she declared. “There was a hammering on the door and there was this footman, all donned in his livery, asking whether this was the residence at which Miss Ruth Mottram resided, and if it was I was to be as kind as to hand her this communication! It was such a large carriage and there was a coat of arms on the door!”

Ruth’s immediate thought was that the message was from her uncle. “It is the Mottram coat of arms,” she said, examining the envelope and wondering, uncharitably, whether it had been brought into the proximity of a steaming kettle. But there was a seal and the seal was unbroken. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “It is from my sister!”

“Your sister?” said Mrs Tucker, somewhat agog.

“My sister, Victoria,” Ruth added. “She is married to a distant cousin and lives here in London. I have been hoping that I would receive some communication from her, but I understand that she is very occupied with entertaining and being entertained. She has invited

me to see her next Monday afternoon and says that a carriage will be sent for me and be at my disposal when I wish to return.”

“Your sister must be very well placed to maintain a carriage,” said Mrs Tucker, slowly.

“I expect that she is,” said Ruth, not knowing quite how to respond to Mrs Tucker’s comment given that Miss Seymour had always maintained that it was ill-mannered to comment upon the pecuniary affairs of another. “It is not the kind of thing I could even dream of.”

Mrs Tucker expressed her approbation of the impending visit and declared that it would be a subject that the other ladies of the house would wish to discuss at dinner that evening once they had overcome their disappointment at not having witnessed the event, and then allowed Ruth to escape upstairs and confer with her uncle’s image. She found it puzzling. Clearly Victoria had received her letter, but why had she adopted the formality of sending her a card requesting her presence at a specified time? It might be true that her sister was greatly occupied in furthering her husband’s business interests, but surely she could have allotted some time to write to her? Surely that would have taken less time than their meeting would occupy? And why send a carriage? Victoria would know that, unlike Mrs Tucker, she would not be impressed by its presence. A short note in the post would have sufficed. Perhaps this was just the way that things were done in London circles?

It was possible that Victoria was holding what Miss Seymour referred to as a *soirée* although they were supposed to be in the evening, not the afternoon. If that turned out to be the case, Ruth thought she would be saddened as she would be denied the opportunity to meet her sister on intimate terms and rectify some of the ill-feeling that she felt existed between them. For a short while she even contemplated sending a refusal by return, but in the end she decided that she should go, and then spent a valuable whole penny on a stamp to inform Victoria of her decision.

She might have saved her hard-earned money for the meeting when it did take place was hardly that of two sisters who had grown up together, played together, and walked in the woods together. Instead of the hugs, tears and kisses that Ruth had expected to both receive and give, she was formally and coldly greeted by her sister who, sitting stiffly on the edge of a velvet-covered sofa, motioned that she should sit on a chair placed some distance away. Instead of a torrent of recollections and shared memories, Victoria asked her in a rather strained voice whether she would like tea which was promptly brought in by a plump girl.

“Are your lodgings comfortable?” she asked in a nervous, high-pitched, voice once the girl had left.

“Reasonable so,” said Ruth, wondering if this was a prelude to being asked to live there. She would decline, graciously, of course, on the ground that it was too distant from the All Saints printing works. It was possible, but not credible, that Victoria was ashamed of having a sister living in lodgings not two miles distant from her establishment. Well, if that was the case it was unfortunate but she had no intention of giving up her rooms!

“And mother? How is she?”

“Well, as far as I can judge from her letters,” answered Ruth, becoming even more puzzled. “I expect she misses us both.”

“That may indeed be so,” said Victoria, stiffly, “but Roger has very important work here in London which demands his and my presence. It is absolutely vital that we should remain here, you should know.”

“Why, yes, of course,” said Ruth, finding Mr Spruce suddenly prominent in her thoughts and wishing that it was not so.

“It is a very important venture that Roger is involved in,” recited her sister. “It is important to many people all over the World. It will make many people rich.”

“I have heard -” Ruth started.

“I can assure you, and this is something you may convey to others, that it is a genuine venture. It is progressing well and on programme. And it has strong and adequate backing for the present. Roger thinks that he and his partners will probably go to the City next Spring.”

“Why are you telling me this, Victoria?”

"None of what I tell you is in confidence," said her sister.

"This is most unlike you," said Ruth. "May I come and sit beside you and talk about this properly?"

"No," said Victoria, firmly. "That would be most inappropriate, most inappropriate. As I was saying, Roger and his partners expect to come to the City in the Spring. Did you know that the contractors have been appointed in Chicago and are in readiness to start on the line from Rio de Janeiro? We have depositions from local landowners, state officials and dignitaries should you wish to view them."

"I do not think I do," said Ruth. "To the limited extent that I have any interest in Roger's venture, I believe you."

"It is all very important to me," said Victoria, sharply.

"Of course it is," said Ruth, softly. "But none of this is like you, Victoria. I do not understand why you are telling me all this. Is there anything wrong?"

"What could there be that is wrong?"

"Well, I find you so changed. This is nothing like the gay little sister I knew."

"I am afraid, Ruth," said her sister, sternly, "I am no longer the gay little sister you refer to. I am married now, with responsibilities, a position to maintain, a household to run, and a husband with complex business responsibilities to support. Those are my duties that I must discharge."

"Yes," agreed Ruth, "but even so."

"You may forget the old, child-like, Victoria. She is no more. My life is completely different now, as must be yours."

"Why, yes, it is. But I am not changed in myself, at least I like to think that I am not. I am still the same Ruth who left you on the seat at Maggot's Bridge."

"Then you are singularly fortunate. You will discover soon enough that life in London is quite different to that in the country. Quite different. I could never think of returning to the village and all those simpletons. And Uncle Lancaster. He is well?"

Roger was waiting for her in the hall when she came to leave. "Victoria," Ruth said, "is she quite well?"

"Ah! You have noticed a change in her?"

"Yes," she said, guardedly. "I hardly know her now. She appears to have lost all her gaiety and vitality."

"That I fear is largely to be laid at my door. I have plunged her into the world of commerce and business and entertainment and I think she has not yet adjusted her mind to the fresh demands these make upon her. She has taken it very seriously, your sister, and devoted all her time to it at the price of the total exclusion of all the habits she once had. Up until a few days ago she was of the opinion that she did not have the time, so committed she felt herself, to even see her sister. Now she has found the time and I feel that is a good sign."

"I hope so," said Ruth. There was what she thought was genuine concern in his voice, the concern that a husband might show for his wife, certainly the concern that a husband in one of her stories would show for his wife. "I would hope to find her in a better humour upon my next visit."

"I fully expect that she will be," said Roger, sympathetically. "I do not think there is any cause for either you or your mother to become concerned and I think Victoria will show a drastic improvement when we get through this next phase of the business we are at. She has taken it very much to heart and greatly underestimated how difficult it can be to convert the sceptics. It is all about confidence, dear Sister-in-law. We have to win a lot of hearts before we can win their heads. It may take no more than the right word spoken in the right quarter. It can be as simple as that, but the difficulty, the agony and the heartbreak is expended in finding that quarter."

Ruth did not offer assistance despite feeling that if she spoke to Mr Spruce authoritatively he would print what ever it was that Victoria desired. Yet she had not been specific. Victoria had mentioned contracts let in America and work starting in Brazil, but she had not talked about the backing they had, and she had missed the opportunity to raise the question. A fine journalist she was turning out to be! As she sat in the carriage, Ruth decided

that she would not be able to report the conversation to Mr Spruce without admitting she had failed to press her sister on the issues he had identified. He would never appreciate that the sister she met did not appear capable of being pressed! No, although she had gained some intelligence, she would remain silent.

Back in the spartan surroundings of her room, she found herself still dwelling on the visit instead of paying attention to her writing. She had to write to her mother and tell her that she had seen Victoria, but how could she tell her of the change that she had found? It would worry her mother and, perhaps, unnecessarily as Roger appeared to think that her sister was recovering from what ever mental state she had been plunged into. So she wrote that she had seen both Victoria and Roger, that they appeared to be happy and devoted to one another, and that they were both very busy and greatly occupied in Roger's business.

She could not avoid Mr Spruce when she went to the All Saints office the following day. She had the impression that he was waiting for her to arrive, and that he had something on his mind other than the reports that would fall to her to write up. "Well?" he said. "You saw your sister yesterday?"

"How do you know that?" she said, trying to appear calm and unruffled.

"I am a journalist and certain news travels. I would not be surprised if some of our competitors are also aware of your visit. So, what did you, as a journalist, uncover?"

"I went to see her as a sister, not as a journalist."

"Ha!" he snapped, reminding her just how much she disliked this man with and for whom she was forced to work. "You are a journalist all the time, Miss Mottram. You are a journalist first and a sister second. You must understand that! So, were you treated as a sister?"

"Why, yes," said Ruth, hesitantly. "I did feel that my sister is not well and perhaps not as sisterly towards me as I would have expected my sister to be."

"I see," said Mr Spruce. "And, the Eldorado? Was that mentioned?"

"In passing. Victoria mentioned that her husband's business occupied a lot of her time."

"What exactly was said, Miss Mottram?" he pressed.

"Very little," she replied, becoming nervous. She had already breached her first resolve and that was to make no mention of her visit. She was now at the line she had to defend.

"And how much is very little?"

"Why," she said, trying to look as if she could not recall the details exactly and thinking that she would have to give an answer even if it was not a full one. "I saw my brother-in-law as well and I think there was some mention of contracts being let and work starting somewhere, but it was all very vague. I did not go there to discuss business and I am sure my sister would have resented me pressing her on such a matter." She thought she could say that as in truth Victoria had appeared reluctant to answer any question, not just those related to her husband's venture.

"I see," said Mr Spruce, knowingly. "And what impression did you gain, Miss Mottram, as a journalist, not as a sister?"

"What impression?" she said, searching for words that would both satisfy him and maintain her defences. She had said too much already. "As far as I can see, the business you speak of is going ahead in a manner that they find satisfactory. My sister is troubled by the commitment that it requires, but there was no indication of there being any kind of problem."

"Nothing abnormal? Nothing said that was unusual?"

"No," said Ruth, feeling that she would be in danger of being damned if she was dragged much further into this conversation. "You are not proposing to print any of this, are you?"

"The little you say you heard, about the business, did you believe it?"

"Of course I did!" she said, indignantly. "My sister is not given to telling untruths, even after living a few weeks in London!"

“I did not ask whether you believed your sister, Miss Mottram. I asked if you believed in what was said. Do you think, for a fact, that contracts have been let in America and work has started somewhere else?”

“Of course I do! Why else would she tell me?”

“Why else indeed? And was there nothing about backers or coming to the City? Nothing at all?”

“Nothing,” said Ruth, feeling wretched and wishing that there was a way to bring her examination to an end. Yet, despite all her resolve, she felt she had to tell him something, throw one scrap in the hope that he would take it and be satisfied. “Except, now that I think of it, there was something said about going to the City in the coming Spring, but you will not publish that will you?”

“The Spring, eh?”

“Mr Spruce. I would like your undertaking that none of this will be published. It would be a betrayal of a sister’s confidence.”

“I would like to reserve my position on that,” he said, smiling. “I am not sure whether this is just a baited line and we are the fish, or whether what was said was genuine.”

“Of course it was genuine! Why should you seek to impugn my sister?”

“I did mention misinformation to you, did I not? You must always examine what you are told, especially if you are writing something that could affect the lives and fortunes of many.”

“Only those who are greedy enough to let their lives be affected,” she said, grudgingly.

“On the other hand, perhaps a small word, a non-attributable word, might help your sister and her husband. It is news that they are thinking of offering stock in the Spring. May be this is the time to mention it.”

“I am sure that if Roger and his associates desired that this information was made public they would have taken the steps to make it so.”

“It may be that they already have, Miss Mottram,” he said.