

Chapter Sixteen

A Death in Winter

That January remained bitterly cold. Everyone commented that it was exceptionally cold, especially for London. Some mentioned tales of the Thames having frozen over in the past and of oxen being roasted on the ice, but this was not repeated. However, it fell to Ruth to report the sighting of ice in the sea off the Essex and Kent coasts. And what she had personally thought to be a problem before Christmas turned out to be no more than a symptom of what was to follow after as she tried desperately to stretch her budget to ensure she had an ample supply of coal. But there were those days when she would eye the pile of papers that constituted her completed works, yet had no option but to let the fire die. Then the cold that lurked in the corners of the room closed in on her with a ruthlessness that compelled her to vacate it for all but the most essential of visits.

Ruth could not bring herself to sit and work in Mrs Tucker's sitting room. That would provoke too many questions, an admission from her that she was out of fuel, and she would be faced with an embarrassing offer of assistance. So she would stay and work at the office where there was a stove which was kept alight day and night. It was understandable that some thought at first that she was wedded to her work. Then they declared she was becoming obsessed with it. No-one suspected as she sat there, longing for the Spring and the longer days, that as much as she enjoyed writing, she feared the paralysis of the cold all the more.

But it was of no assistance to write more. Braithwaite & Sunbury would only publish a set amount at a time which more or less determined the level of fee she received. She toyed with the possibility of writing for other publishers and perhaps she could have done, but she felt bound in loyalty to those who had started her in her career. So on those dismal days and dark nights she wrote of dreadful things and her short stories took on a morbid fatalism which singled her out amongst her fellow writers with the result that one critic commented that had he not known otherwise he would have thought her to be Slavonic. The disease spread to the novel which took a macabre turn and descended into such despair that both Miss Cramm and Miss Stern expressed to her their concern for several of the characters. Yet her following swelled and the circulation of both *The Etna* and *The Vesuvius* steadily increased.

Messrs Braithwaite & Sunbury were delighted, were in no doubt that she was the reason, and congratulated themselves on making such a discovery. They started to draw up plans of publishing a volume of the short stories and even the novel which Ruth had now completed although the published version was still only half way through the chapters. "And it might be justifiable to give her a higher fee," Mr Braithwaite suggested.

"Of it there's no question!" exclaimed his partner, "But that we should and the sooner the better! Her services we would not want to lose to a competitor."

"It is more a question of how much and when. There is always the risk of upsetting others in our employment."

"We could say that she has now served her apprenticeship."

"Why, there's no doubt of that. She is on the way to becoming one of our leading writers. And as for justification, the circulation figure are enough. I do not think we have any option."

"Then we are agreed, are we?" said Mr Sunbury. "Miss Mottram, an increase in her fees shall have as soon as the amounts can be agreed. Will you discuss it with Spruce?"

"Of course," said Mr Braithwaite. "From what he has said he will be in total agreement with what ever we propose. I will finalise the details with him and then impart the good news to her." But before he could carry this out, Ruth received devastating news which shook her to the core.

It was Bob who, red-faced and breathless, having run all the way on the strength of a promise of six whole pennies in his hand if he returned with Miss Mottram immediately,

brought the ill tidings to the office one dull February afternoon. "Please, Miss Mottram!" he exclaimed in a shrill voice, bursting in on where she was sat with Mr Spruce, "begging your's and this gentleman's pardon but there's a man at Mrs Tucker's who says he is come to be fetching you."

"Fetch me?" she said wearily. "What for?"

"He has a message for you on account that your uncle is very ill and fit to die!" said Bob, anxiously.

"What?" she said forcibly. "My uncle? Are you sure that he said it was my uncle? You are not mistaken, Bob?" Bob nodded then shook his head furiously. Mr Spruce raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"You had better go with him," he said.

"It could be the Earl!" she gasped.

"In which case I will cover it. You should go, Miss Mottram. The Daily Pitch will have to get along for a few days without you."

She did not recognise the young man who was awaiting her at Mrs Tucker's and resisting every effort the good woman made to elucidate the reason for his visit. He introduced himself as Timothy and said that he was Mr Lancaster's clerk. Mr Lancaster had dispatched him as that was as quick a way of getting a message to her as any. There was a cab waiting to take them both to Paddington.

"But, Bob says it is my uncle?" Ruth said, anxiously. "That is why you have come!"

"I am sorry," he said in a matter of fact way, "but he has been taken ill and is asking for you. Mr Lancaster thought it best that you were sent for immediately. If you wish to gather together some personal belongings we do have time. The train on which we are booked is not due to leave for an hour. I can explain such details as I am aware of during the journey."

"Very well," Ruth said. "I will go up to my rooms and pack a few things if you will wait for but ten minutes." Bob stood in her path, his face full of expectation. "Oh, yes," she added. "There was mention, I believe, of a small reward for the one who came and fetched me."

"Why, yes, of course," said Timothy, inserting two fingers in a waistcoat pocket and producing the anticipated sum.

Once in her room, Ruth was seized with an overwhelming sense of dread and foreboding. She sat at the desk and studied her uncle's countenance, seemingly unable to mobilise herself. On a sudden impulse she rose and crossed to the window, but there was no one in the churchyard. She took up and re-read the message. Perhaps it had been sent by Matthew, but why had he then not contacted her? It would be ironical if he were to call now, and miss seeing her! But then, perhaps she would never know who had written and sent the card. Perhaps it would always remain a mystery.

Ten minutes later she descended the stairs to where Timothy was waiting. "What has happened?" she asked as soon as they were in the cab and heading towards Paddington. "Has my uncle had another accident?"

"I don't think anything has happened," he said, intent on staring out of the window. "What an extraordinary strange place this is! There's such an abundance of people and so much noise. I am not sure how any one could adjust themselves to it. I don't think that I could bear it, I must say. Are legal gents much in demand here?"

"You get use to it," said Ruth, dryly.

"Yes," said Timothy, thrusting his head out of the cab to look back from whence they had come. "I suppose you can get use to anything."

"And I imagine that lawyers are as much in demand in London as they are anywhere, especially those who are capable of sticking to the point! My uncle?"

"There's not much that can be said, Miss Mottram," he said, bringing himself fully inside the confines of the cab once more. "I am given to understand that your uncle was taken ill last year with poisoning of the leg and subsequently suffered a fall. It is a matter of undisputed fact that he has remained close to his bed ever since and it is now common ground amongst the doctors that attended him that the poison has never been fully dispelled from his

system. Mr Lancaster has told me that of late the Earl has gradually become worse in his spirits and physique, and that the evidence is that the effects of the poison have spread right through him and taken hold."

"And it is thought that he might die?"

"That is the opinion of the doctors, Miss Mottram. A unanimous view, I might add."

"I find this all very hard to believe," said Ruth, almost to herself. "He was so much recovered when I saw him last."

"Mr Lancaster said that it could be viewed as a blessing that the Earl would be relieved of his suffering."

"And I knew nothing of this!" said Ruth. "I did not even suspect it."

The train journey was spent in near silence, Ruth sitting and brooding, Timothy staring out the train window, his jaw drooping, occasionally commenting that he never knew that there was so much countryside. "You are the famous Miss Mottram, are you?" he asked suddenly after they had left Reading.

"Hardly famous," she said coldly. She knew it was unkind, but here she was rushing to be beside this man to whom she owed everything, this man whom she loved more than any man she knew, not knowing how she would find him or even if she would be on time. The minutes spent waiting in Reading station and on the platform at Swindon were minutes he might not have, minutes that she could not afford. A morbid terror was taking grip of her, but she was absolutely helpless to affect the course of events. She felt as much a victim as was her uncle. "I am sorry," she said with a weak smile. "I did not mean to sound so dismissive. I am the writer, the Ruth Mottram who has tried her hand at writing with a modicum of success which she owes entirely to the services of the man we are rushing to see."

"The novel," he said, "if you will allow me to ask. The novel serialised in *The Vesuvius*? It will end happily, won't it?"

"Happily?" Ruth said thoughtfully. What a question to ask! Of course there was an ending, lying amongst the papers that she had left stacked in her room in Lambeth. Now circumstances were changed and she might have to rethink the ending. "I do not know," she added. "Writing a novel can be as uncertain as life."

"If I may be as bold to say so, Miss Mottram, I do not think your readers, and I count myself as one amongst them, will be pleased if the ending is not happy," said Timothy in earnest. "It would be most cruel after all that has happened."

"But that is what living is like, Timothy. At least, that is how I now see it. Our joys, our successes, even our fame is short-lived and snatched from us before we, or those we love, have time to fully savour it."

She paced up and down the platform at Swindon, leaving Timothy abandoned, standing by the small amount of luggage she had brought with her, complaining first to herself, then to an innocent porter who was nearby, that the train to Kemble was supposed to connect and that she had a desperate need to be there and further. Where was it? Timothy's defence of the railway system, telling her what a fine thing these trains were as they had already accomplished in a few hours what would once have taken days especially had they had to walk, as some had, and that there were through trains to Kemble but that they had taken this express because it would be quicker, was of no consolation. Yet the train did come, as did the further one which, in the dark, took them towards Tetbury. And a carriage was waiting at Culkerton, the driver already charged with making to the Hall with all haste.

Her Uncle Lancaster was waiting for her as she was admitted into the hallway. "I am glad you were found and have come," he said.

"Pray God I am not too late!" she cried, following him up the stairs. "Is all that Timothy has told me correct?"

"The Earl is sleeping," said her uncle. "I am afraid that he is very weak and the doctors have stated that his time is come. I am sorry."

"Oh, this is a dreadful business, Uncle. Has my mother been sent for?"

"He has been asking for you, only you."

"May I talk to the doctors? There must be something that can be done!"

“They have left, my dear,” said her uncle softly. “They do not expect him to last through this night. But you must come to him.”

Lucy was sitting beside the bed when they entered. At Ruth’s approach she stood, but lingered and seemed reluctant to leave. “I will take over now, Lucy,” Ruth said. “You should go and rest.” The girl said nothing, glared at Ruth, then swept past Mr Lancaster.

“She was devoted to him,” he whispered. “She puts all this down to his fall that day in the library.”

“She doesn’t blame me, does she?” said Ruth, haunted still by the maid’s look as she passed her by.

“She is a silly girl, faithful but foolish. The doctors said that the fall may have aggravated the condition he had, but the root cause was the poison in his system from the injury to his foot. It has simply spread, slowly at first but lately, more rapidly, to the rest of his body.”

“Oh, Uncle,” she whispered. “This is awful, and I do not know what to do or what I can do.”

“There is nothing either of us can do now, Ruth. He is in the hands, and at the mercy of, his Maker. He has been a good man. He has no thing that he need fear. You should just sit by him so that you are there should he awake.”

In the candle light the Earl’s face looked gaunt and yellow. His breath was difficult, irregular, and coming in short gasps. Occasionally he would appear to choke and a spasm would pass through his body. Then he would be at peace again.

Ruth adjusted the pillows and tugged impatiently at the sheet before sitting down. She looked up at her Uncle Lancaster who had remained at the foot of the bed. “Are you sure there is nothing I can do for him?” she implored.

“Nothing, Ruth, except to be here, should he awake. Do you wish me to stay with you? What ever you decide I will be close at hand.” She did not answer, but turned to the Earl and lowered her face close to his.

“Oh, Uncle, this is Ruth,” she whispered. “I am here to see you. I am here.” It produced no response. “This is terrible,” she said, looking towards the darkness at the foot of the bed. “What if he should not regain consciousness? What if he should die without ever knowing that I came and sat beside him this night. Oh God! I must not cry, I really must not. I would not wish him to see the tears but I fear I may not be able to stop myself.”

“I can stay if you wish?”

“No, Uncle,” she said softly. “You should rest and I will keep vigil. I fear none shall sleep tonight.”

About half an hour had passed, and there had been no change in the Earl’s condition, when Lucy entered carrying a loaded tray which she placed on a table close to where Ruth was sitting. “Mr Lancaster thought that you should take something, Miss Ruth,” she said.

“Thank you, Lucy,” said Ruth.

“Would you like me to stay, Miss?” said the girl, seeming reluctant to go.

“Oh, no Lucy. You go and rest. You may be needed later.”

“Very well, Miss,” said the maid, curtly, although Ruth paid no heed to her manner.

The hours of that night passed slowly. The tea in the pot on the tray grew cold and remained untouched. Mr Lancaster returned after a couple of hours, noted that there was no change, and departed again. Another maid appeared a few minutes later and nervously removed the tray. And still there was no change in the figure who lay awkwardly in the bed.

Occasionally Ruth would lean forward and whisper “Uncle, it is Ruth. I am here for you,” but it produced no response. Now a new enemy stalked the room, reaching out from the shadows. Ruth tried to fight it off, firstly walking the length of the room, then opening one of the windows to breath in the cold night air. But she was always bound to return to her place at the bedside and it knew it would find her there.

Suddenly she awoke with a start. A clock was striking, slowly, ponderously. Five times she counted it before she realised that her uncle’s eyes were open and staring straight up at the ceiling. Terrified she leaned forward and placed her cheek close to his face. He was still

breathing, but barely perceptively. "Uncle," she said again, and for the last time, "it is me, Ruth. I have come to be beside you."

He turned his head slowly and she could see the semblance of a smile as he tried to move his lips. "Don't try and speak, Uncle," she whispered. "Just rest."

"Ruth!" he croaked. "Ruth!" His last words as she leaned forward appeared to be exhaled with his dying breath, blurred, indistinct, but Ruth thought she knew exactly what he was trying to say.

"Yes, Uncle," she said softly. "I will continue to write, I assure you. I am quite a success and it is all thanks to you."

He appeared to try and speak again, as if there were more words that he wished to leave behind him in this World, but they were cut short by a violent convulsion and choking. "Uncle!" she exclaimed and ran to the door. Mr Lancaster was there.

"He has gone," announced the solicitor a few seconds later. "I am sorry, Ruth, but it is probably for the best."

"But I was not able to say goodbye to him properly," she wept. "He called my name. I am sure that he knew I was there, but I had so much to say to him and I said none of it, not one word. Why must it be like this?"

"He spoke to you, Ruth?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "He spoke my name, twice. He was alone and he called out in the dark. Oh, dear Lord, I cannot bear this!"

"I am sorry, Ruth, but I must ask you this as it may be very important. Before I send for anyone, tell me, did he say anything else to you?"

"Uncle!" she said, reproachfully.

"Did he? It could be very important, Ruth."

"He asked me to keep on with my writing," she said, sniffing and dabbing at her red cheeks. "I cannot see what could be very important about that except to me."

"Is that all he said? No more?"

"What more should there be? It was not very distinct as it was."

"What did he say? What were his exact words?"

"Must we discuss this, Uncle? Now? I should pray for him."

"Yes Ruth, now! What were his exact words?"

"You will keep writing," she said. "I am sure that he wanted to say more but it took all his strength."

"You will keep writing? You are sure?"

"Oh, Uncle! I do not wish to be examined on this. Those were his words. They were indistinct and he would have said more had he been spared. Now can we hold this conversation somewhere else and at some other time?"

"Of course," said Mr Lancaster, gently. "You will in time come to learn why this is so important, but for the present I will fetch Twigg so that he can arrange for your uncle to be laid out. Do you wish to accompany me?"

"I will stay here," she said lowly. "It would not seem right for him to be left alone."

"Very well," said Mr Lancaster, "but I will send someone to relieve you in half an hour as I believe you should rest."

When he had left, Ruth crossed the room and stood by the bedside and looked down. "I am sorry," she said aloud. "I am so very sorry, Uncle, that I was not here earlier. Had I known, had we caught an earlier train, had we not been delayed on the journey, I would have been. But I know that you can hear me. I have to say that I owe everything to you, my writing, my success, and it is bitter for me to not be able to share these things with you as it is your appreciation alone I would have sought, not my mother's, nor my sister's, nor Mr Clauncy, nor even the public who read my works. All that I have written, all that I ever shall write, is for you and in your memory. And now that I have come to say farewell, I feel so wretched and so alone. You were the last of my friends. You were the only one I would have counted as a friend. I am alienated from my sister and the path I have chosen has split me from my mother. You were all that was left to me, and now there is nothing. Nothing, and no-

one! I shall never forget your memory and one day we shall meet again in Heaven. Oh, Uncle!”

Closing her eyes she knelt and leaned forward in prayer. She was still there, slumped forward on the side of the bed when a servant came to relieve her.

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