

Chapter Twenty-one

Ruth's Dilemmas

"I see that our Miss Mottram's writing has descended to a new, even darker, plateau," said Mr Sunbury as his partner was removing his hat. "I cannot say that we should necessarily be that happy about it."

"Miss Mottram?" said Mr Braithwaite, smoothing his hair with his hand.

"Have you not read her latest submission for *The Etna*? I have my doubts as to whether it should be published."

"Nonsense!" said Mr Braithwaite, going into his office. "Of course we shall publish it."

"Well, I am thinking that it is as hopeless and demoralising as any tale I have read," said Mr Sunbury, following him. "It could not be more depressing or desperate if she tried. Don't you find it that way?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"That I do say! And you have no concerns for the state of mind of this talented young woman?"

"No. Should I have? Should we have? She is a grown woman."

"She is a changed woman. I was seeing her yesterday at All Saints and I said to myself that she is not the same bright, carefree, innocent young woman who came to this office not nine months since."

"Perhaps she has matured," said Mr Braithwaite, sitting and examining the papers before him.

"Matured?" said Mr Sunbury, thoughtfully. "That is not the way we would expect to see a fruit ripen in my country. I am thinking that there is some vast crushing weight on her mind, a burden that she is carrying, and I am thinking that it would be no benefit to us if this thing were to crush her completely."

"I take your point. What do you think the problem is? Is it that the work is too much for her? There was always a risk in putting a young woman on the print-room floor. I have seen grown men crack under the strain, but I was expecting Spruce to take care that she was not over-exposed. And all his reports have been favourable."

"I have heard it said that her sister is taken to her bed with a serious illness."

"Well, there is little that you or I can do about that. I assume that she is receiving the best treatment and Miss Mottram must know that she is always free to arrange her work so that she can visit her at will. What more could either of us do?"

"That is something I am not knowing but, on my father's life, I am certain that something we must do."

"I suppose you are right," sighed Mr Braithwaite. "When she started here I would have simply written to Earl Mottram. Now there is no-one to look after her interests. The best I can think of is for me to have a quiet word with Spruce, just to ensure that he keeps a watchful eye on our little protégée. I would be loath to lose her services for any reason."

"Thank you, Mr Braithwaite," the partner said, turning to leave.

"Oh, Mr Sunbury! You are not being serious, are you?"

"Serious about what?"

"About the publication of her latest short story?"

"Well," said Mr Sunbury, rubbing his chin. "I think we will have to let the reader decide whether it is palatable."

"So we publish it?"

"It would not be just to deny our young woman her fee, would it, especially if she has other problems. That is what I think."

"Thank you," said Mr Braithwaite. "And I will speak to Spruce."

“Thank you,” said Mr Sunbury, and closed the door behind him.

“I am sorry to hear of your sister’s illness, Miss Mottram,” said Mr Spruce. “Will you accept my sincerest wish that she recovers quickly and fully. Is there anything that can be done? Is your work an impediment to your visiting her?”

“Thank you,” said Ruth, coldly. “I am afraid that it appears that her recovery will be rather protracted. At least that is what her doctor has said. And poor Vicky is so ill that not even I, her sister, is permitted to visit her. I have not dared inform my mother as she would not be allowed to see her either. I dread to think what she would think of me if Victoria’s condition should deteriorate.”

“Do you think that her illness is likely to affect her husband’s business venture?”

“I am sure that I do not know, nor is it something that I have given any thought to,” said Ruth in a tone which left Mr Spruce under no illusion as to her views of the propriety of his question.

“I am sorry, Miss Mottram,” he said, softly, “but you, like me, are a journalist and a writer. You are, I dare say, likely to become a better writer than ever I shall be, but one thing neither of us can do is lay down our pens. It is there, with us, at hand, twenty four hours a day, whether it is in spirit or charged with ink ready to apply our words to paper. You must excuse me asking you as much as I must also be excused for expecting an answer of you, but it is our profession and no matter how hard it may appear, it is something neither of us can escape.”

“I am sorry too, Mr Spruce,” said Ruth. “You know that I have always faced a dilemma in what I see as the private affairs of my family. Yes, it was a reasonable question, even at this time, but it is not one I can answer. Over the last three months I have had virtually no communication with either my sister or my cousin. I know little more about the venture than I did on the very first day that I set foot in this office. I have no idea how Roger’s business is progressing.”

“And you have heard nothing more about, say, this Angelo Calaceli?”

“I did not say that I heard anything about him in the first place!” she said indignantly. The trouble was she could not clearly recall the excuse she had given for raising his name in the first place. She would never become a mistress of deception.

“Of course you did not,” he said. “I just wondered if you had heard or discovered any more about his involvement.”

“No. Have you?” She was pleased to be able to turn the conversation to this man, but it was not without risk. Perhaps Mr Spruce already knew everything concerning this man’s influence and involvement in her cousin’s affairs. Perhaps he knew more about this man’s criminal activities than did Matthew’s contacts in the police. She had no way of knowing what he had written in his file concerning Signor Calaceli. She did not even know whether Mr Spruce was being honest with her. As she had previously concluded, for the little that she did know, he could well be one of this man’s agents!

She was certain of one thing. She had betrayed her sister’s confidence and now her sister was seriously ill. There might be no connection between the two. There could be no connection between the two she assured herself, but she was not prepared to run the risk of breaching that confidence again by telling Mr Spruce any more, no matter how eloquent he was when he addressed her. “I am sorry, but there is nothing that I can add,” she did add.

Much to her relief, that subject was dropped and Ruth was allowed to devote the rest of her time in the office to the work she had to do in respect of her allocated topics. But she could not stop her mind drifting to the dilemma of what she should tell her mother, not just about Victoria, but concerning her growing liaison with Matthew Fayrbrother. It was silly, really. She should have risked writing right at the outset when she had passed him in the street without even recognising him. It would have been easy then, but now if she was to write honestly, it was more difficult, and it grew even more so as each day passed.

Back in her room she would sit and look her uncle in the eye as she searched for the right words. She would write them down but when she read them back they never appeared to fully convey the truth of her feelings. How could she tell her mother that the son of the man

her mother so reviled was becoming the most important thing to her in the World? Yet if she did not do so soon, it would be impossible to tell her! And here she was, by all accounts a gifted and promising writer, and still the words would not come! Always she would hear her mother's comments or the scandalised voice of Mr Clauncy and she could find no way on paper of silencing them. Always they had the last word.

Occasionally, when inspiration was seeping away, she would take down the card that rested by her uncle's image, and read the words and the poem. She was not the only one to have secrets. Here was someone who professed to be an admirer such that they had come one night to stand below her window, yet they had kept their identity a secret! If only it had been Matthew, but she knew that could not be the case. Somewhere out there, amongst the smoking chimneys, under one of the ramshackle roofs, she had another admirer, maybe another who would, if they but met, befriend her. But she should not think this way. It was unfaithful to Matthew.

"I am afraid that I do not have any better news for you," said Matthew when they were together that following Sunday. "I have spoken with your sister's doctor and he says she is not really changed, although that is encouraging because it means her deterioration may have been halted."

"Poor Victoria," Ruth said, softly. "Is it still the case that I may not visit her?"

"I am sorry, but her doctor is very strict on this. But he has promised that I shall be told as soon as he is prepared to relax this point and I will, of course, contact you. I assure you that you shall know as soon as possible. And I dearly hope that day will be soon."

"I am deeply grateful to you, Matthew, for all the trouble you have gone to on my account. I wish that my mother could be here to witness it. I will have to tell her. I should tell her about Victoria. I should tell her about us, if you will pardon the use of the term."

"About us?" he said, smiling. "What exactly do you mean, Ruth?" Her heart fell. Had she said too much? Had she said something indiscreet, something that would offend him?

"About how we have met and continued to meet. And of our friendship. I would like to think of it that way." She felt that she could not risk going further. "In all honesty, Matthew," she added, "as I have told you, I think you are the only friend I have in London if I do not count my sister. It may be that you are the only remaining friend I have in the whole World."

"I would like to be much more than that, Ruth," he said softly. She did not respond but studied his features. His eyes were steadfast and unblinking. How could she possibly not believe him or in his integrity? Yet as she looked up into his face her thoughts slipped back towards her mother.

"I will have to tell Mother about us," she repeated, "as well as about Victoria. I cannot keep all this from her for ever. I am surprised that she has not pressed me more on account of her hearing nothing from Victoria."

"I would still think that it is better to say nothing at this juncture," he said, frowning. "Not, at least, until you have exactly the right words and the right thing to say with them. You must be able to tell her something positive about Victoria. As for us, I am concerned at what her reaction may be. We both know that she does not look upon me favourably. It might be better for us both if you did not provoke her anger."

"Perhaps you are right," said Ruth, hesitantly. "Yet she will have to know, sooner or later. It is no more than a matter of judging the right time and how to break it to her."

"I think you are right. In time the opportunity will arise, but for the present I remain of the view that you should say nothing about Victoria, or of meeting me."

"I know you are probably right," she said, lowly. "My dilemma is what I would say if something were to happen! How could I explain my silence? Mother would never forgive me. Every time I write and tell her that I have not seen or heard from Victoria I feel as if I am tempting providence. There appears to be so much at risk!"

"I know, Ruth, but nothing is going to happen and if you did tell her, what would she do? If she came up to London her journey would be wasted as she would not be permitted to see your sister. If she remained at home she would simply fret and worry and inundate you for

bulletins which you will not be in a position to provide. She probably will not sleep or look after herself, properly. As a doctor, that is something I would deprecate. I know it is difficult. I would find it difficult were I faced with the same dilemma, but this is an example of ignorance surpassing bliss. As for the matter of our meetings you may tell her, but I fear that she might then try to come between us, and I would not wish to allow that. There will be a time when you have better news about Victoria, when you can tell her that she has been very ill, but that she is recovering, that she would appreciate her mother by her side. Then, perhaps, you can tell your mother of the small rôle I have played in all of this, and may be she will think better of me."

"It is such a heavy burden to bear," she said, ruefully. "It is not just the secrets, both of which would plunge my mother into a fearful state of anxiety, but there is also this other matter of which she knows nothing."

"And should remain ignorant," asserted Matthew.

"She would never speak to me again," said Ruth, almost to herself, "were she to discover the truth."

"Then, for the sake of her well-being, we will have to ensure that she does not find out." Ruth did not respond. She found that she appeared to have nothing more that could be said. It was no help to her to go around the same arguments over and over again. There was the danger that if she persisted she would drive him to the point at which he would lose his temper with her. And there was no solution. Whether she told her mother or not, she was doomed.

"Can I say, Ruth," Matthew said suddenly, "and I know this may not be the most appropriate time, but I still cherish the memories of our meeting that day on the bridge."

"Yes," she said, "and it was you who was out of sorts then. Now it is me."

"Oh, yes, I remember. That is not what I recall of the afternoon. Do you remember how you said that you would like to paint the view from the bridge? Did you ever return to do that?"

"I did," said Ruth, softly. "I went back a couple of days later armed with paints and paper, but I have to confess that the work I then started has not been completed. I had half hoped that I might find you there again. In that I was disappointed."

"Well, you have now found me again!"

"For which I am grateful, except we come together under such sad and trying circumstances."

"Then we will have to see if we can meet under less trying circumstances. It must all come to an end, one day, Ruth. I hope that for us it will be the right end.. Meeting you again like this has been one of the most important things that has happened to me. I would not want anything to stop us meeting, not your mother, nor your sister's illness, nor the problem of Signor Calaceli."

"Nor would I," she whispered.

"But if you told your mother?"

"I do not think that I would allow my mother to influence my life to that extent. I am now my own person. I may not be able to vote, but I earn my living by my own labours, select my own choices and make my own decisions. My mother may not agree with some of them, but neither she nor all the Clauncys in the World will change how I feel nor come between us."

"Do you really mean that, Ruth?"

"Of course I do!"

"But people's minds can be changed, poisoned by rumour and innuendo."

"I would not permit it," she said, passionately. "I would not allow myself to listen. I would expect others to follow my example. Yet all you are saying is a recipe for telling my mother sooner rather than later."

"May be it is," he said. "May be it is not. Telling her might, in turn, provoke rumour and innuendo in the village which would hurt her. In any event, there is a threat that is far more serious than your mother and the Curate combined, and that is Calaceli. We still do now know what his intentions are. My police associates say he is now back in this country and

they are keeping him under close observation. But they cannot touch him unless he breaks the law, and they describe him as a slippery customer. Perhaps I should not tell you this, but they did apprehend one of his known henchmen and he was found to be carrying your name and address on him.”

“My address?” she said, horrified.

“Now, my associates stress that this in itself is not a threat.”

“Not a threat, Matthew? Perhaps I should leave London?”

“They do not think that is necessary at the present. In any case you would only be followed. It is better that you remain here where I can protect you as best I can. If a threat does materialise, I will see if I can get a constable posted outside your lodgings, or at least have it checked regularly. But there is no direct threat as yet. They think this man was just keeping watch on you.”

“I knew it!” she exclaimed. “And Victoria was right! I could have been followed! What should I do, Matthew?”

“Nothing at present, apart from being vigilant. That is all you can do under the circumstances. He is being watched. He cannot be apprehended solely upon suspicion, but if he takes so much as a wrong step - oh, dearest Ruth, I wish I could protect you, take you away, from all this. If you as much as see him or anything happens which is in the least suspicious, you must send word to me. I would never forgive myself if anything were to happen to you.”

It was not until much later that day that Ruth found herself recalling and dwelling upon some of his words. At the time she had been so seized with the problems that faced her that she had barely heard some of the things he had said. Now that she thought of them, there were grounds for hope and this lifted her spirit. He had been thinking of her as she had of him. He appeared to be genuinely pleased to have met her again. He had once more called her “dearest”. But most important of all, it appeared to be his intention that their relationship should continue and develop. She was not given to fantasising about her future, but that evening, as she lay back on her bed, she indulged herself. She pictured herself as the wife of a country doctor, or perhaps he would have a practice in a provincial city. They would, of course, have children though she could not settle on how many there should be. And in time, when her mother saw how happy they were together, she would forgive them both and take Matthew as her son.

There were only two discordant notes in her symphony. The first sprung from what Matthew had said when they met on the bridge about his ambition. He had then no intention of becoming a village doctor like his father, but perhaps he had moderated his plans. Perhaps their happiness would justify any sacrifice he would have to make in his aspirations? But what of her? How could she, a doctor’s wife with a family, continue with her writing? She was sure that by then she would either have made her name or know that she was doomed never to achieve the success she strove for. If the former was the case, it was not a sacrifice that she was prepared to make. She resolved she would have, at the very least, a set time of the day devoted to it.

She pictured a house that was roomy and light, warm and comfortable in the Winter, but cool and airy in the Summer. A house that was not permeated with the foul smell of the river but which, like her room at Hazleton Court, would be filled with the scent of roses and Wisteria. All this, and much more, appeared to be almost within her grasp, given good fortune and assuming her assessment of Matthew’s plans concerning her was correct. It would be bad luck to mention any of this to another soul. She would not tell her mother. She would not tell Mrs Tucker or her companion teachers. She would not mention it to Roger or hint of it to Mr Spruce. The most she would do would be to whisper her hopes and fears to her uncle’s image. And she would hope, pray, and wait for him to fully reveal his intentions.

Ruth received two missives in the week that followed, both of which were unwelcomed and added to her dilemmas. The first, from her uncle, arrived by the Royal Mail early on Wednesday morning. In a short, business-like letter he informed her that he had to

come to London on a number of matters in a week's time and would be pleased to call upon her at three o'clock of the afternoon should that not be inconvenient. She might have been tempted to try and put him off had it not been for the letter which then went on to say that he intended to call upon her sister and her husband as well. He ended by stating that he was looking forward to the pleasure of seeing both of his nieces again. As a post-script he added that he hoped also to discuss the matter of the Mottram inheritance.

Her immediate reaction was to put pen to paper, not to reply to Mr Lancaster, but to write to her mother to tell her of Victoria's illness. But was it not too late? Her mother would no doubt know of her brother's plans. How could she explain why she was writing the letter now if it was not because she was fearful of being found out? For a while she wondered if she could bluff her way out of the problem by claiming that she was unaware of her sister's condition, but that would be deceitful and, in any case, one word from a number of people would expose the deception. No, she might be prepared to withhold matters from her mother but she was not prepared to deceive her.

"Oh, Uncle," she said, addressing the image. "What am I now becoming? What am I now to do? And why is he coming to talk to us about the inheritance? Surely if the Will has been found, he would have mentioned it? It was very remiss of you to have concealed it, or what ever you did with it, and then tell no-one! I suppose now we will never know."

Ruth did eventually put her pen to paper and write a letter, but it was to her uncle and it said no more than that she would be pleased to receive him at the hour he had mentioned. As she let the envelope slip from her fingers and it fell beyond recovery into the mail box, she could sense the sound of a gathering storm that was beginning to threaten to engulf her. And there appeared to be no means of escape!

Someone else was putting pen to paper that week, or at least to card, for the second missive arrived, delivered by hand in an un-stamped envelope, sometime during Friday afternoon whilst she was at the office. For a moment her hopes were raised in anticipation as it was not unlike the envelope that had been delivered to her early in the New Year, but her hopes were dashed when she read the message. It said simply

"I am watching you, Miss Mottram, and your Uncle. You can do no thing but I am aware of it.

C."

Trembling and feeling faint she laid it on the top of the writing desk and instinctively went to the window and looked down. But there was no-one there in the graveyard.

She summoned up her courage and examined the note again. The "C" could stand for no-one but Calaceli and she had no doubt that what ever grip this man had on her, it was being tightened. Why did he mention her uncle? Could he be aware that her uncle was coming to visit her and why? What other reason could there be for sending the note and mentioning him now? But how had he discovered that he was coming? The only possible way she could think of was that Victoria's mail was being intercepted and opened by one of this man's agents, someone inside the house. What had her sister said about no longer being mistress in her own house? It was clearly no longer safe to communicate with Victoria in writing even when she became sufficiently recovered to receive and read letters. It might be no longer safe to write to anyone! This thought was mortifying!

Without thinking she held the card up and compared it with the earlier one. The writing was in a different hand, but that was no surprise. It was foolish of her to think that there must be some connection, and she felt guilty at having thought this of her anonymous admirer.

Even had it not been in her mind to tell Matthew about the communications she had received, he probably would have extracted it from her when they met. "Something has happened!" he said immediately, sounding concerned. "I can see it in your face! Have you heard from Victoria?"

"No!" she said, fearing the worst. "Should I have done? Is there a change?"

"Oh, no. I am sorry. I just thought that you had heard something that I had not. So what is it?"

"Two things have happened," she said, looking around her. "Have *you* received a message from him, Signor Calaceli?"

"Me? A message from him? No, have you?"

"Yes," she said gravely, producing the card and handing it to him. "I received that the day before yesterday. I know what you must be thinking but as there was only one day before we were to see each other, I waited rather than trying to get word to you. As you can see I am being watched although I have not been aware of anyone in particular. It concerns me that you may also be under observation."

"That does not concern me," he said, also looking around.

"But, Matthew, it could place you in danger. I really wonder if we should cease to see each other."

"Nonsense! That is provided *you* still want us to continue our meetings."

"Of course I do! It is just the risk."

"Which I consider minimal. What does worry me is that this gives us no indication as to what he is planning against you and your family. Why does he mention your uncle?"

"That was the second thing I have to tell you!" said Ruth, in earnest. "This man must be aware that my uncle has written to say that he is coming to London next Wednesday and that he wishes to see both me and Victoria!" Matthew frowned and looked thoughtful, but he did not say anything. "Do you not see?" she continued. "He will learn of Victoria's illness, then tell my mother, and it will be clear that I have been keeping the matter from her. And how am I to prevent him finding out about you?"

"Why should he do that?"

"I don't know. These things happen. A careless word here and a chance comment there. My uncle, Earl Mottram, even knew about you!"

"Well," said Matthew, missing the significance of Ruth's remark, "I suggest that before you do anything hasty you should wait and see him and hear what he has to say. We know that he will not see your sister. It could all depend on what he is told, but if he learns the truth I suggest you say to him what I have said to you, that is to tell her, your mother, serves no useful purpose and will only worry her."

"And what if he comes to see me first? What do I say then?"

"I don't know why," he said, looking puzzled, "but I had assumed that he would go to your sister's house first. At what hour are you expecting to see him?"

"Three o'clock in the afternoon."

"If that is the case it would leave him very little time to then get to your sister's and call upon her. No, I think you can safely assume that he will come here last. It is possible that he may be simply told that he cannot see her."

"Unless Roger has written to him."

"That is possible," said Matthew. "Do you know why he is coming up to see the two of you?" It might have seemed to Ruth rather unusual to question why an uncle coming to London would ask to see his nieces, but she was pre-occupied with this new dilemma. "Did he say?"

"It has to do with the inheritance. My uncle's Will."

"The inheritance?"

"It is something I have not told you," she said, lowly. "Before my uncle died he changed the terms of his Will and made a Deed negating all his earlier Wills. But this new Will cannot be found and no-one other than Uncle Lancaster knows exactly what it says and he says he cannot reveal the contents but for the Will to be found. Roger made a dreadful scene at what would have been the reading except there was nothing to be read. He claimed that the new Will named Victoria as the chief beneficiary."

"Your sister?"

"It is speculation, I believe, but it could be so. You recall what you told me at the boating lake?"

"I do," he said, frowning again. "Do you think he has found the Will and is coming here to tell you?"

"I do not know for certain, but I doubt it. My Uncle Lancaster is a very orthodox man. I think he would simply call us all to a fresh reading without giving us a clue if that were the case, as that would be the proper thing to do in the legal world. I can only think that he may be visiting us to seek our consent to taking whatever legal action he considers necessary to resolve the issue. In my understanding even that is a courtesy as he is the sole executor."

"Which makes him a very powerful man, and clearly someone that Calaceli would want to keep a close eye upon. The legal action, does that mean an application to Chancery?"

"That is what he said he would have to do if the Will was not found. I must say that I am not happy with the prospect, especially in view of the threat of this man."

"Yes, I can see that," said Matthew. "A case in Chancery would bring the whole affair right into public view. That could be difficult with Calaceli active and, of course, it could be very embarrassing for your sister if the substance of the rumours are aired in Court. It sounds as if her husband might be prepared to do that in furtherance of her claim, and that would not be good for her or your mother!"

"It does not end there," said Ruth, bitterly. "It is my uncle's view that if the case goes to Chancery there is a strong chance that I would inherit."

"You, Ruth?" he said, astonished.

"Yes!" she said, dejectedly.

"And it sounds as if you would not wish that to happen?"

"I do not! Most certainly I do not! I wish to have no claim on my uncle's estate."

"I suppose that I can see that. There would be all the responsibility and worry."

"There is more than that," confessed Ruth. "If it is true that Victoria was named in my uncle's Will and that she was left virtually everything, I would be inheriting at her expense. I could not bear to think that I would dispossess her of the title and fortune and that which would have been rightfully hers but for a lost document! Especially not after all that she will have suffered!"

"The title? Surely that should go to Roger, I mean your cousin?"

"I do not know if even that is straightforward. There is something peculiar about the Mottram succession, something that I do not fully understand." She thought of the necklace and the one night on which she had worn it. It was secure in her uncle's safe in Tetbury. It could stay there, and now did not appear to be an appropriate time to mention it.

"I had no idea that there was this problem with the Will. I am not so sure that we may not be facing a different set of circumstances. Just supposing, and that is all I am doing. This is no more than conjecture, Ruth, but supposing that Calaceli is not primarily interested in your cousin's business venture, but that he has his sights on the Mottram Empire? That might have been why he went to see him. That might be the reason for his interest in you and your uncle. I would have thought that going to Chancery might be a dangerous move at present as it might afford him the opportunity that he is seeking. Whilst the Will is still unread he may be frustrated. As I say, this is all conjecture, but for these reasons and those you have already evinced I would suggest you resist your uncle if he is coming to propose what you think. Could you ask him for more time to think about it? Perhaps the Will will turn up in the interim. You never know. Who can say where it may be? I mean, it is not impossible that your uncle Mr Lancaster has it muddled up with another document. It is easy for things to become mislaid. And there is the matter of your sister's consent. It would not be right for him to proceed without that even if he has the power to do so. And perhaps you should ask him what will become of the title. Perhaps you will become the new Lady Mottram?"

"I think not. I cannot imagine that my uncle would have willed his fortune away from whoever will possess the title. In any case I desire that as little as I do the fortune. All I desire is to be allowed to continue with my writing, no more and no less."

"Is that all you desire from life, Ruth?" he asked, softly.

"No, not all," she said evasively. "There could be other things, different things."

“Well, I repeat that you should ask him to stay his hand, at least until Victoria is recovered or this Will turns up. If he starts a legal action it will be impossible for either you or your sister to avoid being sucked into it, and the consequences do not bear thinking about.”

“I am sure you are right,” she said. “Yet I fear that it simply delaying the inevitable.”

“It may be, but neither he nor you can know that. I think if you say to him what I have said to you he should acquiesce. You should stand your ground and ask him to postpone any action he is thinking of taking. After all, it is you and your sister who have most at stake in all this! Now, I am not going to say any more for fear of trespassing too far on your indulgence and good nature. I would not want to overstep the mark and offend you.”

“I cannot imagine that you could ever do that,” said Ruth. “As for my uncle, I shall do my best!”

She returned to her room feeling dejected and empty. It had been almost like a business meeting, wholly occupied with the troubles that faced her, with few words of endearment. It was not the way that she imagined that their meetings should progress and again she wondered how long it would be before he grew tired of having to deal with, and express a view upon, one issue after another. Yet what could she possibly do to change the way events were developing? She longed to see him more, much more, but what was the risk that if she did their conversations would be just the same? He talked about trespassing on her good nature! How close was she to swamping his?

Perhaps it was not in his mind to suggest that they should meet more often. Perhaps he was growing tired of having to share her burden. Perhaps it was no longer in his mind to call her “dearest”, or to edge their relationship further. He might have always seen her as no more than a friend, although there had been times when she might have thought otherwise. Earl Mottram or her mother, had they been there, would have asked him what his intentions were towards her. It was not a question she could pose on her own behalf. She would have simply to wait and see if they emerged.