

Chapter Twenty-three

A Visit to see Victoria and a Long-awaited Proposal

The disappointment and anger that Ruth felt persisted for long after she returned to her room. She could not bring herself to sit at the desk and write, but flung herself despairingly onto her bed and lay there looking up at the darkening ceiling. She was angry with herself for taking such risks with her happiness, yet disappointed that having taken the risks she had gained nothing. She was also angry with herself for not feeling better disposed towards, and more enthusiastic about, the prospect of seeing Victoria. She was more concerned with her own position than she was with her sister's, and that added guilt to her vexation. Worst of all, though, was that she felt she had let him slip through her fingers! Why, oh, why was it the convention that a woman should never propose marriage? Perhaps, being seen as the weaker sex, it was to protect them from the demoralisation that a rejection would bring, but surely it was every bit as devastating to find oneself *not* to be proposed to when one expected it?

It was late afternoon when she roused herself and an early dusk was settling outside. Very soon Mrs Tucker would be sounding the small gong that hung from a stand in the hall. Without really thinking about what she was doing she went to the window and looked down into the graveyard. No-one was there on this occasion, no-one amongst the living that is.

It came as a shock to come face to face with Lucy when the front door of her sister's house was opened in response to her impatient tug on the bell, and for a moment she was transported back to her room at Hazleton Court where Lucy had attended her. There was the same look of resentment and impudence in the girl's eyes, but she did smile when she told Ruth that she was expected and that she could see her sister straight away as the Master of the house was otherwise occupied. She followed Lucy up the stairs, looking with interest into two of the rooms on the ground floor, the doors of which opened off the hall. It looked very grand and was in sharp contrast to her rooms in Lambeth.

Matthew had warned her to be prepared for what she might see, but despite girding herself, Ruth was shocked by what confronted her when she was ushered into her sister's bedroom. Victoria was there, propped up beneath pale pink drapes in a large bed, with little more than her head visible above the pink, satin sheets. Ruth hardly recognised her as her sister and could not comprehend the changes in her. Her lovely hair had been crudely hacked away, leaving patches of bald skin in places. Her swollen face was a pale yellow, the skin gaunt and stretched tight across her prominent cheek bones. Below her red and peeling nose her lips were purple and bloated. And then there were her eyes, sunk deep into their sockets, lifeless and showing no response to her approach. "Victoria," Ruth said softly. "It is me, Ruth. I have come to see how you are."

The eyes moved slowly to focus on her and the lips started painfully to move, revealing a row of discoloured teeth. "Ruth!" she whispered. "I am to go to the Ball, but my hair is falling out and they have cut it off. It is all cut off." Her voice tailed away and she closed her eyes as if the effort of those few words had exhausted all her strength.

"Oh, Vicky!" said Ruth, close to tears. "What can I do?"

"I cannot be seen like this," her sister croaked. "I shall have to wear a wig, Ruth. A wig! What will Mama say? Does she know?"

"About you, Vicky? No, I have not told her yet. I did not know what to tell her. Oh, Vicky, I have been so worried about you!"

"She must not see me like this," said Victoria in a low monotone. "I do not want her to see me like this." She paused and closed her eyes again. "Please do not send for her, Ruth. She must not see me without my wig."

"Of course I will not," said Ruth. "Not if you do not wish it."

“And my face,” said Victoria, producing a withered, bony hand from below the sheet and touching her cheek. “It feels changed, but they will not bring me a mirror. Is it changed, Ruth?”

“A little,” she said. “Now you must rest, Vicky. You have been very, very ill and you now have to get better. All this talking is clearly sapping your strength. If you wish you can sleep and I will sit here beside you and be here when you waken.”

“I have not been ill,” hissed her sister. “I have been poisoned!”

“Oh, Vicky! You must not say things like that. Of course you have not been poisoned!”

“I have!” her sister whispered. “They are killing me!”

“You have been very ill. I have received regular accounts from your doctor these last four weeks or more. But now you are recovering, and that is what matters. That is all that matters.”

“That is very true, Miss Mottram,” said a man’s voice from behind her. “I am sorry to enter unannounced but my business is complete and I like to spend as much time as I can at Victoria’s side. Now, my dear,” he went on, leaning over her, “what your sister says is quite true. You have been very, very ill, my sweetest. And you must indeed rest as much as is possible if you are to make a full recovery and be once again the bright little thing that I married.”

Roger took Ruth’s arm and led her to one side, away from the bed. “I am pleased that you have come,” he said, quietly. “I would have sent for you earlier but there was little to be achieved by your presence as she was so ill and likely to die. Her doctor expressly forbade visitors. Even I was permitted to see her only for short spells. It was a matter of life and death, a harrowing time that wears a man down, I don’t mind telling you. We had someone here at her bedside night and day for more than three weeks, but it is hoped that she has turned a corner and the worst is over. I was given to understand that you were aware of much of this through a mutual acquaintance of the doctor? A medical colleague, he said.”

“Yes,” said Ruth, looking back towards the bed where her sister appeared to be now sleeping, “I was kept informed. But she talks of being poisoned.”

“I am afraid that some of the fever has not yet released her. She has talked of many things. I am afraid that there are moments when she thinks she is back in our uncle’s house preparing herself for the Ball. There are periods when she is completely delirious and says quite outrageous things, and one might then fear for her sanity. As it is we cannot be sure that she will ever return completely to her senses.”

“Oh, goodness! I have not yet told our mother a single thing, and Victoria has now asked me not to allow her to see her like this.”

“I think that is wise. She expressly asked to see you, and said the same to me concerning her mother. Her doctor takes the view that given what she says, it would be injurious for her state of mind if her mother were to visit her at present. And I am afraid that she is not a pleasant sight, is she? It is hard to believe that this is the pretty little thing who was so captivating on the dance floor what, not a year ago. See what she has been reduced to, temporarily we must hope. May I ask if you are prepared to be guided by the views of her doctor regarding contacting her mother?”

“Yes,” said Ruth, softly. “I am not comfortable with it, but I will respect both her wishes and his advice.”

“And I assume that Mr Lancaster called upon you last week as he did upon me?”

“Yes,” said Ruth, feeling that she should chastise him for his apparent callousness but being fearful of the consequences for her sister if she should.

“And you said?”

“Should we talk about this here?” she hissed.

“Here, there? What difference does it make? Ah! You are thinking of your sister. Well, Victoria is asleep. She is still lightly sedated and will not wake now for an hour. We can freely and this is as good a place as any. And you told him, what?”

“I told him that I did not wish for him to refer the question of the inheritance to the courts, at least not yet. I understand that you said very much the same thing.”

"I did indeed, Cousin Ruth. So we are in accord on one matter at least."

"I had Victoria's interests very much in mind when I did so."

"And so did I. You see, there is another matter in which we find common ground! And he, what did he say?"

"He agreed not to proceed for at least six months although he reminded me that he did not require our consent in order to do so and that he would still go to the courts if he thought the circumstances warranted it."

"I see," said Roger. "Well, I think that is good news. Let us hope that the damned Will turns up and we can end this charade and my wife can have what is rightfully hers."

"After all that she has gone through," said Ruth, looking across to the bed where her sister was breathing unevenly, "I would pray for nothing less."

Victoria was always in Ruth's prayers. Some evenings she would light a small solitary candle in her room and dedicate it to the health and recovery of her sister. This evening Ruth reinforced her prayers with an impassioned appeal for the recovery of the Will, placing it above her relationship with Matthew and the resolution of her other troubles. As she went to extinguish the main candle, her eyes fell upon her uncle's image, indistinct and ghost-like. In the flickering light his lips appeared to be moving, almost imperceptibly, just as it had been on his death bed. "Oh, Uncle!" she said softly. "What did you do with it? Why did you not tell anyone? Why did you not tell me, someone who you could have trusted implicitly? Why can you not tell me now? Please God, let it be found soon!"

Later, in the darkness that filled the room, and the silence that gripped the night, the only image that she could see was a pale, yellowish face, and fixed, lifeless eyes looking out from it, resting on her sister's pillows. She tried to think of other matters, of what Roger had said, but she could not escape the vision. It would still be there when the first tentative rays of dawn reached into the room.

It was the next morning, in the growing, mean, grey light of another misty day, before she was able to bring her mind to other things. She wondered why Roger had not taken the opportunity to mention Signor Calaceli. It was possible that he thought she was unaware of the man, or his activities, and had to wish to alarm her. Yet if the threat was as great as it appeared, surely he had a duty to tell her? An alternative was that he was not aware of how great the threat was! She, therefore, had a duty to talk to him, and she resolved that she would do when she was next able to visit her sister. But then she recalled that it was likely that Roger was being blackmailed by this man. If that was so, it was hardly something that he could admit to his sister-in-law. If Roger were being blackmailed, and there was truth in what Victoria said about her household and this man's influence in it, could there also be some truth in what she had said about her being poisoned? Perhaps that was why Lucy had been brought up to London? Roger wanted to have someone in the house who could be trusted to supervise the preparation of Victoria's food, perhaps even prepare it herself! Ruth had heard stories about the effects of South American poisons which left no detectable trace, and this man was a South American! Was it not possible that Victoria was right, except that no-one would listen to her? There had been no miscarriage! It was simply a case of attempted murder!

Oh, this was no more than a journalist allowing her imagination to steal and run away with her common sense! It was all pure fantasy! This affair with Signor Calaceli was affecting her judgement and leading her into seeing conspiracy everywhere. That was, no doubt, a part of his *modus operandi*! The truth of the matter was that her sister *had* been very, very ill and that what she said was no more than a product of the fever which still clouded her mind. The fact was that there was also this Signor Calaceli, who was a very dangerous man and who, even now, might be standing beneath her window, looking up. She had to know!

Softly she lowered her bare feet onto the cold linoleum, went out to the writing desk and cautiously peered through the tiniest of chinks in the dusty curtains. She could see the graveyard wrapped in a strange, yellowish, light. She could see the gravestones, and the indistinct mass of the church. But, as had been the case a few days earlier, there was no-one standing there.

By the time that Ruth came to leave for the office, the mist was thick. The two teachers had left before her, commenting on whether all their young charges were likely to appear or whether a list would be on its way to the Truancy Officer who was, by all their accounts, kept full occupied in most weathers. Mrs Tucker had declared that the elements were insipid and that it was not *her* kind of weather. It was not surprising that Ruth congratulated herself upon finding her way straight to the All Saints works, for not having walked into a gas lamp-post or pillar box, and for not straying down one of the many alleys that were set there to trap unsuspecting pedestrians and to lose them thoroughly, a fate that was about to befall many who were abroad that morning.

"I have to ask you Miss Mottram," said Mr Spruce, wearily, "whether you received any news of your brother-in-law's venture. I assume that you did see him yesterday?"

"I did see him," she said, coldly, "although the purpose of my visit was to see my sister for the first time in many weeks. He did not volunteer any information and I did not think it appropriate to seek to interview him under the circumstances."

"There is still speculation in the City that the Mottram inheritance is to be referred to Chancery. Some speculate that papers have already been lodged with the Registrar. It is thought that if that is true, the Eldorado is undermined and your brother-in-law could be ruined."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Ruth. "How could that be?"

"Quite easily," said Mr Spruce, confidently. "You will recall what I told you about how these business venture work in the City? You may recall that I said that it was not entirely clear who your cousin's backers are or where the funding is coming from, and that many thought that the collateral for that backing was the Mottram inheritance? It is a question of confidence, you see. Even if it was never true, the markets and the people who matter have made an assumption and their confidence in the venture is based on this assumption. And before you challenge me, I must also observe that this is an assumption that your cousin has never taken any steps to deny or correct. Some say that if he has not openly endorsed it, he has by a sly nod or wink indicated that it may be so. Now, if the inheritance is to be settled by Chancery there are two conclusions that can be drawn. The first is that it will take a long time, and far longer than your cousin can afford. The second is that the outcome is no longer certain and therefore it cannot be considered for underwriting the venture. The combined effect of these two conclusions, if they are true, will be to strip all confidence in the venture. Indeed that will happen unless there is some clear statement to the contrary, whether or not it is true. What the City needs is for someone to come forth and say that there is no reference to the courts."

"I can say that here and now!"

"You can say what, Miss Mottram?"

"I can say that it is not proposed that the Mottram inheritance will be resolved by a reference to Chancery, not now nor in the foreseeable future."

"You say that very authoritatively."

"Do I? Perhaps that is because I do know and recognise the truth when I see it, Mr Spruce!"

"You realise that if the Will is not found, there will be no option but to go to court? Or has it already been found?"

"It has not, but it will be."

"And I may quote you on this, without attribution, of course?"

"Absolutely!" said Ruth, and went off to write her columns for that day.

The mist had thickened by the time that Ruth came to wrap her shawl around her shoulders and set off for Mrs Tucker's. Although she had set out earlier that day brimming with confidence as to her navigatory skills, everything looked quite unfamiliar and after but a few paces she was not sure that she was not lost or, to put it another way, that she was where she thought she should be. A few paces further and her concern was metamorphosed into fear as she concluded that there was someone there, close by, and following her. She could clearly hear a kind of shuffling behind her, as if the person was dragging one of his feet as he walked. "Don't be silly!" she told herself when she stopped and the sound ceased too. "It is no more

than an echo." Yet the noise persisted and above it soon she could hear someone breathing heavily, gasping in lung-fulls of the mist. She quickened her pace, but her invisible pursuer responded.

Why would anyone follow her, she asked herself, unless they intended her harm? Why would Signor Calaceli have her followed this purposely when he or his henchman knew very well where she lived? She was now beginning to think of some of the reports that she had dealt with in her work, or read as they passed across her desk, of people who went missing, or young women who were pulled from the Thames and never identified. There were accounts of people murdered every day! Many were in London! It was possible that even now, unknowingly, she was heading towards the river. If she came upon it, blocking her escape, she would have little chance of avoiding being thrown into it, if that was in the mind of her pursuer. But why would Signor Calaceli wish her dead? She would be of no use to him if he had her killed, unless it was to be as an example to Roger!

She told herself to keep calm but paid little heed to her words. There was nothing to hand with which to defend herself and seemingly no-one on hand to come to her aid. Apart from the person behind her, she appeared to be alone in the World. Oh, if only she were to encounter a policeman or one of Matthew's contacts! If only he, who had said that he wished to protect her, would step out of a doorway or appear on the pavement before her! Perhaps someone was at hand, ready to rescue and assist her. That was how it was arranged in fiction.

Quite suddenly, without her being aware of it, she was outside Mrs Tucker's door. Once inside the house she felt safer and went straight up to her room, closing the door behind her and leaning against it as if that would deter her follower if he had the audacity to enter and mount the stairs. For a moment she closed her eyes and waited for her heart beat to fall and her breathing to become more regular. She was at least safe now, but this could be the pattern of what was to come. It did not augur well for her future.

When she was sure that there was no-one on the stairs creeping up and about to burst into the room, she relaxed and crossed to the window. There she saw something that made her cry out and leap backwards. After a few moments she edged forward again and looked, confirming her worst fears. He was there, standing in the graveyard below her window, looking up. She could see his black figure and the black cowl surrounding his white face. She could not clearly see his features as they were obscured by the swirl of the mist, but she could see his mouth, blood red, drawn into a frightening, sardonic, grin.

A noise like the sound of a thousand furies filled the room. Darkness was closing in upon her as she tried to escape back and away out of view, but she could feel her feet turn to lead and her knees weaken. Now the furies were inside her head and she knew nothing further.

The room was in semi-darkness when Ruth opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor a few feet from the writing desk. Her first thought was that it was ironical that she should, like her uncle before her, fall in its close vicinity. Then, as fear gripped her, she remembered what she had seen from the window. Cautiously she hauled her limp body onto the bed and lay there trying to gather her senses and summon up enough courage to stand. He could be still outside the window. He could even have entered the house whilst she was lying there! Worst still, he could even now be there, in one of the bedrooms, close at hand! She had once thought that inside the house she was safe. How could she have been so naïve? Even were he not there, he could have assembled a gang of cut-throats who could be outside, ready to force the door and rampage through the house! She could already picture the headline to the newspaper column.

Ruth listened. She could hear her heart beating rapidly, but other than that the house was silent. She had lost track of time. Was it possible that Mrs Tucker had already sounded the gong? No, if she had someone would have come up to investigate her absence. However, it could be sounded at any moment! Cautiously she eased herself off the bed and edged her way across to a spot from which she thought she would be able to look out of the window yet not be seen. She was fooling herself, though, she thought. He knew she was there. What was the purpose of concealment? What this demonstrated, if she required any such demonstration, was that she was not safe, not there, not anywhere. He could strike when he wanted to, in his

time and in a location of his choosing. She was completely at his mercy and had little or no chance of preventing herself becoming another of his victims.

It was the sound of Mrs Tucker striking the gong that galvanised her into action. When she peered through the window the graveyard was perfectly normal and there was no-one. He had, to her relief, gone, although she did not know where to. All that was left for her was to go downstairs, white faced and still trembling slightly, for dinner.

“It was just like before only far more terrifying,” she explained to Matthew. And this time I did not know what to do. What was worse, I fear I fainted. When I recovered my senses I found myself lying on the floor of my room. I wondered if I should alert Mrs Tucker and my companions to this situation, or whether I should move out altogether. It does not appear fair to me to alarm them or place them at any risk on my account! I sat there, on edge, all through dinner, convinced that something terrible was going to happen at any moment, which of course it did not. I have no idea what they thought of me, probably apportioning the blame to you and considering it was an affair of the heart!”

“An affair of the heart?” he said softly. “Have you one?”

“One what?” she asked, her thoughts being back in the mist and her darkening room.

“An affair of the heart? A paramour? Someone else, someone who admires you as much as do I?” Ruth could not stop herself thinking of the card propped against her uncle’s image on the writing desk. “Well?” he asked.

“I appear to have many admirers,” she said, giving him one of her now rare smiles, “but none is so precious to me as you, Matthew. But if this man is an admirer, he is one that I would be pleased to discourage if not banish completely. You cannot imagine for one moment, nor could I adequately describe, how grotesque and evil he appeared. A picture of out and out wickedness. And what is there to prevent him from visiting me again? Nothing! I am convinced that he has it in his mind to do me some injury. If I for one moment concede what Victoria said to me, he has seemingly failed with her. Now he is come for me, and I fear for my life!”

“Ruth!” he exclaimed.

“I do, Matthew, really I do. He was there behind me as I walked home from the office. I could all but feel his breath on my neck. He had only to stretch out and his hands would have closed around my throat. Or it could have been a garrotte slipped quickly over my head. I believe they are much favoured in South America. Or it could even have been a knife thrust forward through my spine. It would have been so easy. I would have been despatched quickly and no-one would have known. I must do something to protect myself from his clutches.”

“There appears to be only one answer for it,” said Matthew. “I will have to give you my protection by marrying you and making you Mrs Fayrbrother.”

“Matthew!” she exclaimed. “Is that a proposal?”

“I suppose that it is.”

“It is the strangest proposal that ever I heard of and not in the least romantic.”

“It is not a desperate measure, if that is what you are thinking.”

“It is not that,” she said. “It is not the manner in which it is done, certainly not in books. In any event I would hope that if you really are proposing marriage you have reasons other than simply your wish to defend me against this villain. I dare say that if I addressed my mind to it I could procure someone to guard me or appeal to the constabulary.”

“I am sorry,” said Matthew, looking confused. “It was clumsy and unthinking of me. Ruth, dearest, you must know that I think of no-one other than you and that you are always in my thoughts. I have felt this way about you since - well, I do not know when. It was something I could never say to you for reasons of which you are too aware and I had no way of knowing whether you felt the same way towards me. I know this is not the right time, place, or conditions under which to make a proposal. I also know that I am expected to go down on one knee before you, which I assure you I would willingly do except I beg your indulgence as this is a public place and even now we could be under observation. I had hoped that I could wait until these troubles were past and your sister well again before I said what I

wish to say, but none of us is complete master of the events that shape and control our lives. That is how it is with both me and you. That is why, here, today, dearest Ruth, I come to you with little to offer you apart from a poor doctor's earnings, a rented but comfortable house, and my protection, to ask if you will give me your hand in marriage. I expect nothing of you except that you become my wife. I know that you will not bring a dowry. I know and that you have no wish to benefit from the Mottram estate. I wish you to be exactly as you are now. But I hope you understand me, dearest Ruth, when I am mortified by the threat this vile creature poses for the one I so adore. It is only natural, only human, to reach out and seek to protect you. Will you, Ruth, take me?"

"I will have to think about it!" said Ruth. It surprised her that she could be so contrary. Here was the object of her desire and all that she had to do was reach out and he was hers. He looked slightly startled. Clearly it was not the answer he expected and she started to wonder whether she had been hasty in her response. But it was for her to respond. He could not withdraw the promise without being in breach. Oh, what was she thinking about? Why was she thinking like her legalistic uncle? How could she not answer straight away?

"Do you not love me?" he asked.

"It is not that, Matthew, not that at all," she said, pleased that he had given her the opportunity to justify her reaction. "I have to consider what my mother's reaction will be and how I will deal with it. And I have to ask myself if by marrying you I would be simply placing you in greater danger rather than I would be under your protection."

"I would not have thought that I would be in any greater danger than I am now," he said smiling. "As for your mother, may I be absolutely reckless and suggest that we do not tell her?"

"What?"

"We could inform her after the marriage, present her with a *fait accompli*."

"Oh Matthew! How could I possibly do such a thing? What would she think? What would be said?"

"Do either of us really care? Let us face it, Ruth. If you tell her, she will oppose you. If you invite her to the wedding, do you think that she will come? Let me tell you what I have in mind. You could have the banns read here. You are a spinster of the parish. We could be married within a month and then you would be safer. But you have not given me an answer. Am I to be disappointed?"

"No, Matthew," she said, softly.

"Then I may hope?"

"I feel that I need time to think this all through. What you have asked of me has so many implications. You obviously have thought through some of them."

"Nothing else has occupied my mind for weeks," he said.

"Well, you must allow me to catch up with you," she said.

"But this is not a refusal? Why can you not place my mind at rest? We can work out the details together, Ruth. Why cannot you give me your answer now?"

"No," she said, firmly. "I must be allowed to think this through."

"Very well, Ruth," he said, smiling, but she could detect disappointment, perhaps even annoyance, in his voice.

Ruth returned to her rooms with a light step, not bothering even to check behind her to see if she was followed. Malcolm had said more than enough for her to be satisfied as to his intentions and she was certain that he would not be deterred by her deferment of her answer to his proposal. She knew what her answer would be, but it was such a major decision that she instinctively felt that she should not give him his answer immediately. And there was still the matter of her mother to be resolved. Should she write to her now, saying that Matthew had proposed? There was the indistinct fear that somehow such an announcement would become entwined with the problem of Victoria's health. It might even provoke her mother into coming to London. She could visualise her stepping from the train at Paddington with Mr Claucy close at hand! No, she thought she should not rush into such a thing.

"Something has happened!" declared Mrs Tucker when they were all assembled at the dinner table that evening. "I can sense it," she continued. The teachers looked at each

other across the table, and then at Ruth. "Something has happened to Miss Mottram!" Mrs Tucker added. "She has some good news and is bursting to tell it us. I know it is none of our business, Ruth my dear, but it is written as large as life all over your face. Come along, now. You are not one given to being bashful! Has that young man of yours asked a certain question?"

Ruth blushed and lowered her head, but smiled for all to see the kind of humour she was in.

"Oh, has he?" squealed Miss Cramm.

"And what did you say to him?" demanded Miss Stern.

"I asked for a little time to consider what my reply should be," Ruth said.

"Gracious!" said Miss Cramm. "I am absolutely sure that I would never let a man off the hook quite so easily once he had impaled himself that firmly!"

"Nor I, I am sure," said Miss Stern. "You must be very certain of him and his steadfastness."

"I think I am," said Ruth, "and if he is not prepared to wait for my decision he is not worthy of an answer."

"Why did you not accept him straight away, though, my dear?" said Mrs Tucker, sounding quite maternal.

"There are one or two things to think about. He is suggesting a short engagement and a quick wedding. He says he would like the banns to be read here."

"I must say that I have never seen the point of these eternally long engagements, have you Emily?" said Miss Stern. "The men simply go off and get themselves killed before you have had the opportunity to become a widow."

"I agree, Sarah," said Miss Cramm. "I have always thought that the description widow sounds preferable to spinster, have not you?"

"Indeed I have. It is so unfair that there is no recognition of having lost one's intended during one's engagement," said Miss Stern, sounding rather tearful.

"I don't see that," said Mrs Tucker. "Once you's married them they's only gone and run off. But we are not setting the best of examples for Miss Mottram to follow, are we?"

"My worry is my sister's illness - whether it is right to be married whilst she is still unable to leave her bed. Then there is my mother. She has not been told yet."

"Of course she has not!" declared Mrs Tucker. "Not if your young man only posed his question this afternoon."

"Did he get down on his knees?" asked Miss Stern.

"He offered to do so if I insisted, but asked to be excused in recognition of it being in a public place."

"My Arthur did," said Miss Stern, beginning to sob. "He went down on one knee and he looked so ridiculous that I could not help but laugh at him all of which made him nervous and full of a stutter. It took him a full fifteen minutes on account of his stutter and my giggling."

"The problem is that my mother may not approve of Matthew on account of his father. It is nothing that Matthew himself has done, other than be his father's son."

"Not approve?" said Mrs Tucker, growing red in the face, "but he is such a personable young man, and a professional young man to boot. I so informed your uncle when he called here."

"Could your mother forbid the marriage?" asked Miss Cramm. "You are not a Ward or anything like that, are you?"

"I am not a Ward, nor has my mother any legal authority over me, but I have been asking myself what I would do if, upon hearing of the proposal, she wrote expressing her strong disapproval, for that is what she is likely to do."

"If you love him, Miss Mottram," said a tearful Miss Stern, "and he loves you, you should put your happiness first and before the wishes of your mother. Time is against you. Time is against us all and if you do not answer you will be in danger of ending up like me, an ageing spinster with no hope, a mere hulk drawn up on the shore above the high water mark and with no chance of being re-floated again!"

“Sarah!” scolded Miss Cramm. “We are not here to depress or embarrass Miss Mottram. This should be a joyous occasion! We should be drinking her health and wishing her good fortune for what could be a very illustrious future!”

“Marriage is no bed of roses,” said Mrs Tucker, not heeding Miss Cramm’s plea, and not feeling that she would describe herself as a hulk on account of considering herself very re-floatable should the occasion arise.

“And roses have thorns,” said Miss Stern. “But Miss Mottram is of age. She is, like us, a professional woman fighting her way in a masculine world. You should make your own choice and not allow yourself to be fettered by your mother, nor by anyone, and that should be taken to include us three!”

“Well said, Sarah,” said Miss Cramm. “I agree.”

“And I think,” said Mrs Tucker, rising, “that as Miss Mottram is clearly of a mind to accept the proposal, we should celebrate in anticipation of that event. A little port wine should suffice!”

“Oh, yes!” said Miss Stern, a little more brightly. “We will all drink to your good health and your continued happiness.”

“It is difficult,” said Ruth, holding the glass up and thinking that the colour was close to that of the dress she wore to the Ball, “it is very difficult to express your decision when you know that your choice will almost certainly lead to pain, confrontation and other difficulties for the ones you love. But I shall think about it.”