

Chapter Twenty-seven

The Completion of a Long Journey

The day was bright and sunny when Ruth opened her eyes. She was in an unfamiliar room looking up at a clean, white, ceiling. Pink curtains fluttered at the open window through which she could see a large tree. There was a small wooden wash-stand, a table and chair and a dark, stained, wardrobe. The door was slightly ajar. She had not been taken again!

Her mind was confused. She could remember tripping and hurting her ankle. She had been carrying a basket then, but it was nowhere to be seen. Then, yes, there was the picture of the oxen and Mr Biskit driving them, but had it all been a dream? If it was, where was she now? The scent of roses reached her and she suddenly noticed that there were several placed in a china vase next to a glass decanter filled with what she assumed to be water, beside the bed. She realised she must be at Toby's cottage, somewhere near High Wycombe.

It was when she thought about getting up that she realised that her stocking had been removed and her left ankle was swathed in damp towelling. Carefully she poured herself some water and wondered what was the best thing to do. She recalled that she had told Toby that she was there in connection with her writing but wondered whether she ought now to tell him the truth. It was not that she expected him to help her in placing as many miles as she could between herself and London, but he might be able to offer her advice. He might even know someone who was setting out in that direction. Any assistance would help, even if it were for only a few miles.

She had no sooner reached this conclusion when she started to have second thoughts. It was possible that they would not believe her story or, if they did, they would advise her to contact the authorities. Yet if she said nothing, Toby would be insisting on taking her to the station and without money that would not assist her in the least. It was not within her experience for the Great Western Railway to willingly carry non-fare paying passengers.

And she could not just slip away, saying nothing. Had she pen and paper she could have written them a note. She could hardly ask for some and then use it for that purpose, and she began to feel guilty at the line of thought she was pursuing. Yet she had to continue her journey.

Whilst she was in the middle of her deliberation a woman came in and smiled at her. "I am pleased to find you awake, my dear," she said. "How are you feeling? You have slept through the best part of the morning as well as last night and yesterday evening!"

"What?" said Ruth, trying to get out of bed.

"Steady, steady, now," said the woman. "You must try and keep off that ankle. You have given it quite a nasty twist and the only cure for that is rest. Nothing else will do, believe me. I think the swelling has come down quite a lot overnight and that's a good sign."

"I am sorry," said Ruth, shaking her head. "I really am being most rude. I should be thanking you and your husband - I assume that you must be Molly - for your hospitality and help you have given me in my need."

"That is quite all right," said Mrs Biskit. "I must admit that it gave me a bit of a turn when Toby came in and says that he's found this young woman who's in desperate need of assistance. Why, I thought the wrong thing entirely! And then he tells me who you are and how it is that he is in the way of giving you lifts on a kind of regular basis!"

"He has been there when I have needed someone now on two occasions. I am very much indebted to him."

"He should be indebted to you," she said with a knowing smile. "He told me that you are a writer so we procured the periodicals in which your stories appear so that I could read them to him. And that is what I did! And, on doing that, Miss Mottram, what did I find but my own husband portrayed there? It is him down to a tee and you have done him a great

service, except he did not see himself in the mirror! Of course he said what a coincidence it was, him sharing a Christian name with this other carter! Would you believe that?"

"Did you both enjoy them?"

"Did we enjoy stories about a carter? What do you think? I am fair worn out in having to read them almost every night. If you would like to do me a service would you write a number more, perhaps four and then we can have one for every night of the week!"

"I will have to see what I can do when I get back to the office. But first I must think about continuing my journey."

"Continuing your journey, my dear? In my opinion you are not fit to walk as far as the garden gate. You have just slept for sixteen hours. It isn't natural."

"I do not know why I am so tired," said Ruth, frowning. "Perhaps it is the country air. It is so different to that in London."

"And that's what Toby always says when he comes back. He is off at present and therefore not here to corroborate it, but those are almost always his first words!"

"I shall remember that," said Ruth, smiling but studying her ankle. "Perhaps if my Toby Musket says that once or twice the secret will be out?"

"I would not bet on it, but I am forgetting myself. You must be hungry and thirsty. Now that you are awake I will bring you up something. We have nothing other than simple country fare, mind you."

"That is what I am use to," said Ruth, moving her toes. "What is the time?"

"It is past noon. Toby should be back early evening but he has already sent word to your husband."

"He has done what?" said Ruth, sharply.

"Well, knowing just who you are and knowing where you work Toby sent a lad up to London yesterday with a message to say that you had been the victim of a minor accident and could not walk, but you were here, safe and well. He said if we weren't doing that there would be a hue and cry the likes that have not been seen for years."

"And this boy? He is back?"

"Why, bless you!" said Mrs Biskit. "He was back last night. He went to the printing works and they said that he should better go to your house which wasn't more than a spit away. So there he goes and the maid says that the master was out but expected back shortly and that she would give him the message of his wife as he was driven to distraction by her absence. He did right did he? You are married?"

"Yes I am married," said Ruth, letting her head droop.

"Well, then, you should be more cheerful, if I may be as bold to say so, as you should be reunited with your husband any minute now."

"Any minute?" said Ruth, full of dread. "He cannot see me like this!"

"If he is the husband that you deserve, my dear, he will not be worried at how you look. If he is any other, then he does not deserve you. That's what Molly Biskit says!"

"He will be coming," said Ruth, her voice becoming high-pitched and thin. "My husband will be here at any minute and he must not find me like this. I must get up!"

"Oh, no!" protested Mrs Biskit, trying to restrain her. "You must stay where you are! Just lay back this minute and I will fetch you some refreshment."

Ruth disobeyed as soon as Mrs Biskit had left the room and started to descend the narrow stairs. This was a disaster, the worst thing possible! Through their good intentions this good couple were in the process of delivering her back into the hands of her enemies! It was a petrifying thought.

She went to the window and looked out. The tree was too far away to reach but below her was a sloping tiled roof over an extension to the cottage. She should be able to slide down that and drop to the ground. It might be a heavy fall, but as long as she did not land on her ankle, and as long as she did this undetected, she should be able to escape. Feverishly she pulled on her stocking and searched the floor until she found her shoes.

Suddenly she was aware of voices below her, first outside, then within the house. From the window she could just see the top of a carriage standing a little way away. They were here! They had come for her! Even now she could hear them at the foot of the stairs!

Trying not to cry out, she grabbed one of the pillows from the bed and laid it over the window sill and the frame of the open window. There was not time to scramble out and she had no idea who might be outside, watching for her. So she retreated and stood in the only place that she could possibly hide.

She could hear them coming up the stairs. The footsteps and the voices grew louder, but only one, apart from Mrs Biskit's, was familiar. The door swung open, right open and threatened to crush her. "She is in here," she heard Mrs Biskit, on the half-landing, say triumphantly. "I was just about to fetch her something to eat. Can I bring you something as well?"

"I don't think we have time for refreshments, none of us," said Roger, sharply. "It is imperative that we return to London post-haste. This has been all very inconvenient as it is. I have a carriage waiting."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Mrs Biskit. "She's gone! And she only woke up a few moments ago! Indeed I have only just left her after telling her that you were on your way."

"She knows we were coming?" said Roger, furious.

"It seemed a most natural thing to tell her," said Mrs Biskit, defiantly. "She must have gone out the window."

Ruth shrank back into her corner and held her hand tight over her mouth, desperate not to make the slightest of noises. He might even detect the presence of her terror. She heard Roger cross to the window. "Pah!" he said, disdainfully. "She must have slid down the roof! She could still be outside! Come along, we must find her!" Ruth heard the footsteps on the stairs grow quieter, then some shouting outside, and then there was silence.

For several minutes she was afraid to move for fear that they would come back and discover her. Then, trembling, she slowly edged away from the door and sat on the bed, holding her head in her hands. She might just have had the narrowest escape of her life, but she was still trapped and could not attempt to escape for fear of encountering one of her pursuers. No doubt they were outside now, searching the outbuildings, stables, garden and hedgerows. They would probably stay in the immediate area for some time, yet she could not remain where she was. For all intents and purposes, she was trapped.

"It is all right, my dear," said a voice, softly, causing Ruth to leap like a scared rabbit. "It is all right," Mrs Biskit repeated. "When I saw you behind the door I knew that something was not quite right. So, as soon as I could, I took our lad, who went to London, to one side and told for him to wait in the front garden and to tell your husband and his company that he had perceived, with his own eyes, this young lady in a black dress getting into a pony and trap which then headed off in the direction of Wycombe. Quite honestly, my dear, although I am sure that there is nothing more in this life that you want at present other than for them to go away, the longer it is before he sees and tells them, the better it will be for you."

"That was not my husband," said Ruth, "but my cousin."

"Why, you are shaking!" said Mrs Biskit, retrieving her pillow and closing the window. "Now," she said, sitting beside Ruth and placing her arm around her to comfort her, "it is clear that you are in some kind of trouble and I can assume that it is not a trouble that you wish to take to the authorities else you would not be here. What can we do to help?"

"You are very kind," said Ruth, "but now they know I have been here they must not know that you have helped me. My cousin is quite ruthless and is in league with a criminal who would stop at nothing. I do not know what has happened to my husband and I have barely escaped with my life."

"But should you then not go to the authorities?"

"No, not yet, not until it is safe to do so. I must get to my uncle in Gloucestershire. He is a solicitor and one I think I can trust. He will know who best to contact and what to say. In any case, I am not sure what weight my word, that of a mere woman, would carry with the authorities and I have no way of knowing what slander my cousin has already spread about me."

"Then let us help you. I already feel terribly at how we have brought this upon you!"

"Then you should not," said Ruth. "You did the natural and correct things in every respect. Your kindness and consideration are beyond reproach, but I cannot risk you any more in this affair."

"But this place that your uncle lives. Perhaps Toby could take you there?"

"It is still a very long way," said Ruth, in earnest, "and he must not be placed in a position where they have any cause to take revenge upon him. It might even be better if he knew nothing of this conversation. I have some idea of the lengths to which these men will go and expect the very worst. I must now draw them away from you. Even now there is the risk that they will discover that your pony and trap was a decoy and conclude that there is something here to hide."

"They might," said Mrs Biskit, smugly, "if it were not for the fact that Mr Barker who lives a mile or so up the road to Stoken Church, and who always goes to Wycombe on this day, passed by not fifteen minutes before they arrived. They might even have passed him on their way here! They will be pursuing a real pony and trap and all the way into Wycombe as well. I cannot imagine that they will return here. Indeed, you might as well stay here and rest at least another night. Then, if you are still of a mind to leave us and travel on down to this place of your uncle's in Gloucestershire, the least I can do is pack you some vitals for the journey."

"And Mr Biskit. What will he say when he returns and finds me here? I would rather that he remains unaware of what I have told you. I fear that the combination of his kindness and yours if released against me could put you in grave peril."

"We will tell him a little white lie. We will tell him that your cousin did indeed come for you, but that it was agreed to leave you out here to complete your work and that they will be returning for you sometime during the day tomorrow. Toby will be so pleased and finding you here still that he will not even think to query it."

"And if they come back?"

"They won't come back. They will track Mr Barker into Wycombe and be exceedingly lucky to pick him out there. The trail will go cold as you could have travelled anywhere from there, perhaps by rail, carriage, stage, or foot. In time they will simply return to London. You are safe for the present. Now, I really must bring you up the refreshments I promised you a short while ago. Then I will put another compress on your ankle. We must take full advantage of the situation in which we find ourselves!"

Mrs Biskit was kind, helpful and tried to be reassuring, but Ruth still felt alone and like a hunted animal, but one deprived of its sense of smell and never knowing from which direction the hounds are approaching. It was probably true that Roger would have gone to Wycombe. It was possible that he had there lost track of her and that he had gone back to report to Signor Calaceli. But had she been the hunter rather than the hunted, she thought she would have returned to the spot where the pursued was last sighted, simply to see if she could pick up the trail again. Mrs Biskit might consider that they would abandon the search, but Ruth could not be sure. The sooner she left and was on her way, the better.

"I think I should leave as soon as possible," Ruth told Mrs Biskit when she returned. "They know that I was here and they could return."

"Your don't mean this afternoon, do you, surely?"

"I should. It saves putting you in potential danger. It saves you having to practise deception on your husband. And I will feel more comfortable. I have already lost a day. I must continue on my way."

"I cannot stop you, Miss Mottram," said Mrs Biskit, gravely. "I trust that if you are determined in this you will at least let me pack you some provisions?"

"Of course," said Ruth. "I would be very grateful for that!"

"And you must send word to us just as soon as you are safe."

"Of course," Ruth repeated. "I will not forget."

The sun was low and before her as Ruth bade Mrs Biskit farewell and started on what she saw as the second leg of her journey. She had to admit to herself, though she would never have revealed as much to the good woman who was waving even now to her, that she did

have her misgivings. The injury to her ankle served to remind her that her journey had its own dangers in addition to those she faced from her pursuers. Had she broke her ankle when she fell, she might have been lying there still, undiscovered, parched and growing weaker. Soon, however, the cottage was no longer in sight when she looked around. She was on her own again. Rising ground confronted her as she clambered over a stile then crossed several tracks or lanes, one after the other. At the top of the rise was a small wood and then she was into open ground again.

It was a balance that she had to find, between risking further damage to her ankle which was already beginning to feel sore, and putting as much distance as possible between her and the house at West Wickham. Away on her right she could see a farmhouse and a cluster of barns, but she ignored the temptation of rest and shelter, walking until the night was upon her. Still she pressed on, across a metalled road, through another wood, and up another hill partly obscured by woodland. Now the problem was not one of her ankle but of ensuring that she did not become lost or injure herself in any other way in the darkness. Finding a large haystack close by she burrowed in and rested there, looking out at the night sky.

They had been told briefly of the constellations at school and Miss Seymour had talked about telling one's fortunes from the stars and planets. If only she could now tell what her fortune was likely to be! Perhaps had she learned to navigate by the stars she could have continued, but there was always the risk of falling foul of a hazard. And had she not heard that the folk of this area dug holes and lit fires to slake lime? There could be any number of pits out there. No, she was better to remain and rest where she was until it was light once more so that she could see which way to go. From what she could see in the sky before her, she concluded that she was probably facing south, a fact she confirmed the following morning. And as she closed her eyes that night, Ruth thanked God that Matthew had not come to fetch her. It indicated that he, too, was in captivity and not involved in this frightening plot. One day they would be re-united, but before that she had to reach her uncle, and that would take a further number of gruelling days.

A strong, gusting, westerly wind had blown up over night and Ruth was forced to battle into it as she started on her way the next morning. She was pleased when having passed over the brow of the hill she was able to descend into the first of a number of dense patches of woodland which, whilst scary as the wind wrenched at the branches overhead, afforded her some shelter. She was following a well-trodden path which assisted her in the conservation of her ankle. Very soon she began to feel more optimistic, almost cheerful. She paused only to refresh herself with some water drawn from a fairly isolated well and to partake of a little breakfast. And after a little over two hours walk, when the morning was still young and probably still before her friends in Lambeth were sitting down to their breakfast, she suddenly emerged from a wood to find herself confronted by a steep slope descending away from her. Before and below her the land was stretched out, flat, a patchwork of fields and copses, extending for miles. For one forlorn moment she hoped that her goal might be visible on the distant horizon, but she realised that it could not be.

Away in the distance, slightly to the north west, Ruth could see a large town which she took to be Oxford. She intended to pass well to the south of it. She could remember she had read of an ancient track that ran across the country, East to West, and thought that if she could locate it, that would be her best route. Yet she did not know where she could pick it up nor how she would recognise it when she did so. As long as she kept heading in a westerly direction she would be all right, she told herself. Then, just as she was contemplating her descent of the scarp face, she spotted a sinister, low, grey, mist rapidly approaching from the south west. She had no doubt. It was rain!

She had barely reached the shelter of the wood when the storm was upon her. Although she stood with her back to a sturdy oak as it creaked and groaned and the leaves flurried around her, very soon her hair was soaked and she could feel water running down the back of her neck. In desperation she tried to tear a strip from one of her under-slips to wind around her head, but it was futile. Before the storm had passed, she was soaked.

By providence the sky that followed in the wake of the squall was clear, but Ruth had no option to continue her journey in shoes that squelched every time she put foot to ground

and clothes that were saturated and which hung heavy on her. Had she been more fortunate she might have been close to a barn or shed and could have run for cover. It was just her misfortune to be caught where she was. But then the wind was warm and very soon her hair was feeling drier, though lank. And most of the day had passed before her under-slips ceased to feel damp and cling to her limbs.

There was a path which appeared to lead down the escarpment, narrow and made slippery by the rain. Brambles tugged impatiently at her dress as she struggled to retain her footing, always wary of her ankle. Once she reached the bottom she was in more open country, easier across which to make progress, but less easy to remain concealed. And they would be out looking for her now. Her presence at West Wycombe would have signalled that she was heading West. Roger and Calaceli would have their men visiting all the towns and villages that might lie on her route, asking after this dishevelled, bonnet-less, woman in black who was probably limping and who would bear the stigmata of having travelled a long distance on foot. She could try and stick to the open countryside but progress was more difficult. It was true that she met fewer passers by in doing that, but there was no doubt that her passing was noted. That was the dilemma, as she would have been lost and quite invisible in a crowd.

For the next two hours she followed a long, winding footpath, sometimes as wide as a cart track, which brought her inevitably to a small hamlet where she ate some of the food that Mrs Biskit had prepared for her and obtained a glass of water at the Inn. Close by she was able to cross the river that then blocked her way and cut across country to try and get to the south of the small town which lay before her and which, if the milestone she saw was correct, was called Didcot. She crossed over the railway on a small bridge only to find another arcing around in a cutting perhaps not more than an hour's walk further. Again she was able to cross on a bridge close to an earthen mound, noting that the line, which ran away to the south of her, did not look well used. Not much further on, after scrambling up a hill and over some ancient earthworks, she found the track that she thought she sought. It stretched away to the West. She could follow part of its course running along the crest of the low bank of hills. That was the way she was destined to go.

It was not an unpleasant walk. It was, perhaps, one that she would willingly have undertaken for recreational purposes, armed with a parasol and in dry and comfortable clothing. It was an easier walk than crossing rough fields or common land, but it was featureless and tiring. In the middle distance before her she could pick out a dark, black, mill and she decided that would be her aim, to reach it before sun fall, and to try and find somewhere then to spend the night. When she did reach it, she found it locked tight but seemingly abandoned. There appeared to be little choice but to sample the amenities offered by Oxfordshire haystacks, two of which stood close by. "Eskimos have igloos," she said allowed as she hollowed out an area for her to crawl into, "and I have haystacks." She made a mental note that contrary to popular, romantic, belief, haystacks were anything but comfortable. She would fit that into a novel or short story if ever she wrote another one.

It had not been a bad day. The rain had caught her unawares and she had found it uncomfortable and difficult to make progress in her wet clothes, but her ankle, though sore, had held up, and that was reassuring. Providing she remained careful and did nothing rash, she would succeed in reaching her uncle's house.

As she closed her eyes she was possessed by the thought that if for some reason the haystack were to collapse on her during the night, she would be smothered and it was likely to be months before ever her body was found, but she was past caring about risks like that. It was also in those seconds of semi-consciousness that her guard slipped and the enormity of what had happened to her came home with full force. During the day she could block it out as there were other matters to occupy her attention. During the time she slept, she was largely oblivious to it, although an essence of it was capable of percolating into her dreams. But in between she was vulnerable and very much shocked by the duplicity and treachery, and afraid of what she might suffer were she taken.

The next day was by no means as good as the one it followed. Despite following the track for the whole of the morning Ruth felt that she made less progress than she would have

expected and that she was having to stop to rest more often. At lunch she finished the remaining provisions that she had carried from West Wycombe. Worst was the fact that the track appeared to be taking her through uninhabited open countryside. But she could see stream winding its way along parallel to the track at the foot of the hill and she was forced to expend precious energy descending the slope to it, refreshing herself, then climbing back to the track again.

She passed south of another small town and a number of hamlets as the day wore on until she was forced again to deviate to one in the late afternoon to purchase food. It had only a handful of houses, but an Inn at which she was able to purchase bread and cheese. This was so remote, she thought, that not even Roger's men would have visited here. Disregarding the suspicious looks from the Innkeeper's wife, she felt safer and more confident of success than she had at any time since she had left their house.

The sun was falling as Ruth climbed the hill to rejoin the track. Her ankle was beginning to ache again, but she would be able to rest it soon. She was virtually at the end of the small amount of money that she had brought with her. And her shoes, which she had examined closely whilst sat outside the Inn, were splitting and in danger of coming apart. Of course, they were never designed for such usage. If it had not been for that little vixen, Lucy, she would not be facing these troubles now, still, what, fifty or sixty miles or, dreadful to think, even more from her destination. That was as many as another four days to be spent without the money to buy food, walking possibly barefooted! It was not what she had anticipated when she set out.

She spent the night in the open close to a massive earth mound which reared up, black, beside her, into the dark sky. She could not make herself comfortable on the hard ground and it appeared to become cold and damp as the night wore on. When the dawn broke over the eastern horizon and started to light up the morning sky with a blood-red flame, Ruth found that her limbs were stiff and she had some difficulty in rising. As the sun pursued her, she dragged her body forward as the track gradually climbed even higher. She reached a point where it swung sharply to the South and she realised that she would have to leave it and head West. It was only when she came to a northwards pointing sign post to Swindon that she realised the track had taken her too far south.

A long road lay before her, stretching straight in both directions. It would be a risk to follow it, but she was told by a passing clergyman that it was the Cirencester road and knew that was the direction in which she must head. The mention of the name gave her a boost as it was the first really familiar one she had heard and she knew she was getting near her quest. After half an hour's slow and difficult walking she had the good fortune to receive a lift on a farmer's hay cart which whilst it progressed no quicker than walking pace, did at least allow her to rest. The problem then, as the sky began to cloud over, was to keep awake.

It was dusk before she reached an Inn and, with difficulty, persuaded the owner to allow her to sleep in the hay barn above the stables. He was clearly curious about her appearance and treated her as if she might be an escapee from an Institution. For Ruth it was a risk. She was now entering the territory where Roger, if he was seeking her, would have intensified his efforts to find her. He might have even handed her description to this innkeeper, but there was nothing in his attitude that suggested that he recognised her or thought she was anything other than a vagrant. And Ruth was so very, very desirous of somewhere to lay her head that night and grateful that a place, any place, might be found.

To her dismay she grossly overslept the following morning. She had intended that she would be up and away at the crack of dawn having established that her best route was now to strike due west and head towards Malmesbury. The stable boy was clearly shocked to see her, this wild-looking woman with her hair awry, her face blown red by the wind and sun, her clothes torn, mud-splattered and dusty, as she descended from the loft, and he ran off, across the yard, shouting for the landlord. It would not have concerned her but the innkeeper then appeared, a large man, standing menacingly, confronting her and blocking the exit. For a moment she hesitated. She would not be able to dart around him and there appeared to be no other means of escape. She then realised that she must have been wrong in her assessment of

him. He was engaged by Roger to take her and she was caught! It was all at an end and she had suffered all this for nothing!

"I don't want to know who you are, young lady," he said, gruffly. "Nor want I to know where you're heading or why you're heading there. It's plain to see that you are a lady of some education and breeding and that you must be in some kind of trouble such that you might appreciate help even given with no strings coming from it at all. I would then like you to take this." He held out a small pannier basket. "There's bread and cheese and apples. It's as much as you are likely to want to carry over any distance. All I ask of you is that if you are in these parts again you bring me back the basket as it was the property of my dear, departed, wife."

The tears were streaming down her cheeks as she took the small, woven, basket from him. "I do not know what to say except to beg of you that if a man, any man, comes here and asks if you have seen a woman in black, a woman who might fit my description, you tell him you have not. Otherwise, I thank you from the very bottom of my heart for your kindness."

"That is something I will do should the occasion arise," he said, stepping aside to let her pass. "Now I must be going about my business. I will wish you good fortune in your journey. And I would warn you that it'll rain within the next three hours. All the signs are there to be seen."

"Thank you for that advice. The last time I was taken by surprise and soaked. This time I will be warned and looking out for it, and shelter."

The first part of that day's journey was straightforward and along a wide cart track which ran dead West from the Inn but shortly after she had crossed a small river and a cross roads the track came to an end. A little to the north she could see a gap in the hedgerow and another track running off, so she followed that until she reached a point at which it turned North. From that place on she took to the fields again only to find herself confronted by a stream which she followed until it disappeared into a culvert under a railway embankment. Ruth concluded that this must be the line to Kemble, the line that she would have taken to reach Swindon when she went to London. It was also the line along which Roger would come should he take the train to Minety!

In the distance she could see some men approaching along the railway track. They might have been maintenance workers. They could easily have been Calacelian agents, scouring the countryside for her! If she went on now, especially if she climbed the embankment and crossed the track, they could not fail to see her. The most sensible thing to do was to hide in the culvert where there was a ledge about a foot wide on which she could crouch until they were past.

It was while she was hiding there that the drizzle started. It did not appear to deter the men and she could hear their voices as they approached, whilst they were overhead, and as they receded southwards towards Swindon. She waited there a full half hour before she decided to edge her way along the ledge to the other side of the tracks. When she reached the end of the ledge she was confronted with a mass of water irises and reeds. She could see the bank some five or six feet away, too far for her to step across onto it. Ruth knew that she should have retreated and climbed up the embankment, but she decided to try and jump towards the bank, hoping that there would be solid ground where she landed, but there was none. Her feet sunk into the mud and water and she fell forward into the reeds, letting go of the pannier as she did so which scattered its contents into the stream. When she scrambled out of the water up onto the bank she had lost her shoes and most of the items the innkeeper had given her, and was soaking wet from the waist down.

She sat on the bank for a long time, the empty basket beside her, miserably surveying the scene, feeling sorry, vexed, and guilty at losing in one incident not only that which was left of her shoes, but also the kind gift she had received that morning. The drizzle turned to rain which fell, lightly at first, on her head and shoulders. At least it might wash some of the mud and slime from her legs and skirt, she thought. At least she still had the pannier. But what should she do now, given her predicament?

She would have to go on, Ruth thought, shaking her head, yet her body appeared reluctant to do so. It was only the approach of a train from the North that compelled her to

move, laying flat on the ground in the hope that no-one would see her or, if they did, they would think it was no more than a bundle of old rags and never realise there was a cold, wet, weary and frightened, young woman inside. Then she started walking, slowly, across a pasture towards a long copse she could see. Somewhere beyond it she collapsed onto a bank, cold, shivering and breathless. It was still raining, harder now, lashing and hurting her face, but she no longer appeared to be affected by it. If the truth were known she was as wet and cold as she could ever get. If the truth were told, she no longer cared whether she was cold and wet, whether she walked or lay, whether she was hungry or replete, whether she was awake or asleep.

The day was growing darker. She had no idea what time it was as she forced herself to stand again, and started out across a slowly rising field. Her mind was turning to unexpected things and trying to trick her into believing her surroundings were different to what she faced. One moment she would be in the Italian Garden, the next she was standing in her rooms at Lambeth looking out over the graveyard. There was a shadowy figure there, looking up at her. Then another joined the first, and another. These were the men, the forces of Evil, that were ranked against her, who even now were closing in on her and who would soon crush her. As she watched them, helpless, they seemed to gradually fuse into one dark ball which then slowly grew larger until it filled the graveyard, the room, the whole Universe, and engulfed her.

She was going to die, she knew that. She was going to die there, on that spot where she had fallen to the ground, awkwardly twisted, the pannier lying a few inches from her outstretched hand. In her dream, if it was a dream, she could see all this. She could hear Roger's voice explaining that his sister-in-law had been working too hard and under too much strain, and had simply run away from home and all the combined efforts of him and her husband were to no avail. Matthew, he then said, distraught at her loss, had taken his own life. It was a tragedy, the extent of which was realised only months later when the remains of this young woman, who had so much to live for and who could have given so much to the world of literature, were discovered a mere five miles from her home. It was a tragedy for the family as hers was the third death in a year, but at least it solved the Mottram inheritance! So it was not all bad, Roger pointed out.

Then Ruth was back at Hazleton Court Hall. At first it was the night of the Ball and she was putting on the Mottram necklace, except her clothes were muddy and Lucy was wearing her only other dress and, laughing at her, would not remove it. Then she was at her uncle's bedside and she was leaning forward to try and catch his words. At first they were indistinct, but as he repeated them they became clearer and she understood. That was what he had been trying to say! He had not been asking her to assure him that she would keep on writing! He had been trying to say that the Will was in the writing desk! He had gone to the library to hide it, knowing that he would give her the desk and with it entrust the Will to her care!

"You cannot blame me," Ruth said to the accusers that were ranked against her.

"Had you heard what was said more clearly, I would still be alive," said Victoria from her death bed.

"Yes!" said Mrs Mottram, appearing at her daughter's side and glaring across at Ruth, "you have killed my daughter as readily as you are now killing yourself!"

"No!" screamed Ruth and opened her eyes. Around her the day was grey and wrapped in a swirling wet mist. Objects would appear and be visible for a few seconds, then disappear again as they were re-consumed by it. She had great difficulty in standing and in maintaining her balance. And then she had no sense of knowing the direction she was heading in. All she could think of was that she had to walk, and keep on walking, because if she was to lie down once more, she might never rise again in this World.

How long she walked and stumbled under the weight of her clothing, she never knew. She might have been walking around in circles for all she cared, but she was conscious as she put one foot after the other on the wet grass, that the ground was rising again. Then, quite suddenly, looming before her in the mist, was a gibbet. And at the very moment that she saw it and recognised what it was, she heard a man's voice call her name. She was discovered,

caught, about to be taken, imprisoned, and put to death. This time it was the end. This time there was nowhere that she could hide or any way in which she could escape. This was the end!

Yet she tried, running forward into the mist, desperately trying to make her legs work and carry her body forward. Her name was called again and she could hear his footsteps growing louder and he chased her. He was going to catch her, there was no doubt of that. Not even the mist would save her. And when she felt her left ankle give way and she fell painfully forward, she knew she had done his work for him.

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