X

IN pursuance of this policy Elizabeth set out early in the afternoon next day to walk out to Grebe, and there eat pie with a purpose. The streets were full of holiday folk, and by the railings at the end of the High Street, where the steep steps went down to the levels below, there was a crowd of people looking at the immense expanse of water that lay spread over the marsh. The south-westerly gale had piled up the spring tides, the continuous rains had caused the river to come down in flood, and the meeting of the two, the tide now being at its height, formed a huge lake, a mile and more wide, which stretched seawards. The gale had now quite ceased, the sun shone brilliantly from the pale blue of the winter sky, and this enormous estuary sparkled in the gleam. Far away to the south a great bank of very thick vapour lay over the horizon, showing that out in the Channel there was thick fog, but over Tilling and the flooded marsh the heavens overhead were of a dazzling radiance.

Many of Elizabeth's friends were there, the Padre and his wife (who kept exclaiming in little squeaks, "Oh dear me, what a quantity of water!"), the Wyses who had dismounted from the Royce, which stood waiting, to look at the great sight, before they proceeded on their afternoon drive. Major Benjy was saying that it was nothing to the Jumna in flood, but then he always held up India as being far ahead of England in every way (he had even once said on an extremely frosty morning, that this was nothing to the bitterness of Bombay): Georgie was there and Diva. With them all Elizabeth exchanged the friendliest greetings, and

afterwards, when the great catastrophe had happened, everyone agreed that they had never known her more cordial and pleasant, poor thing. She did not of course tell them what her errand was, for it would be rash to do that till she saw how Lucia received her, but merely said that she was going for her usual brisk walk on this lovely afternoon, and should probably pop into the Picture Palace to learn about tadpoles. With many flutterings of her hand and enough au reservoirs to provide water for the world, she tripped down the hill, through the Land-gate, and out on to the road that led to Grebe and nowhere else particular.

She passed, as she neared Grebe, Lucia's four indoor servants and Cadman coming into the town, and, remembering that they were going to a whist drive at the Institute, wished them a merry Christmas and hoped that they would all win. (Little kindly remarks like that always pleased servants, thought Elizabeth; they showed a human sympathy with their pleasures, and cost nothing; so much better than Christmas boxes.) Her brisk pace made short work of the distance, and within quite a few minutes of her leaving her friends, she had come to the thick hornbeam hedge which shielded Grebe from the road. She stopped opposite it for a moment: there was that prodigious sheet of dazzling water now close to the top of the restraining bank to admire: there was herself to screw up to the humility required for asking Lucia if she might join her silly callisthenic class. Finally, coming from nowhere, there flashed into her mind the thought of lobster *à la Riseholme*, the recipe for which Lucia had so meanly withheld from her. Instantly that thought fructified into apples of Desire.

She gave one glance at the hornbeam hedge to make sure that she was not visible from the windows of Grebe. (Lucia used often to be seen spying from the windows of the garden-room during her tenancy of Mallards, and she might be doing the same thing here.) But the

hedge was quite impenetrable to human eye, as Elizabeth had often regretfully observed already, and now instead of going in at the high wooden gate which led to the front door, she passed quickly along till she came to the far corner of the hedge bordering the kitchen-garden. So swift was thought to a constructive mind like hers already stung with desire, that, brisk though was her physical movement, her mind easily outstripped it, and her plan was laid before she got to the corner. Viz.:

The servants were all out—of that she had received ocular evidence but a few moments before—and the kitchen would certainly be empty. She would therefore go round to the gate at the end of the kitchen-garden and approach the house that way. The cinder path, used for the prancing of the callisthenic class in fine weather, led straight to the big coach-house doors of the kitchen, and she would ascertain by the simple device of trying the handle if these were unlocked. If they were locked, there was an end to her scheme, but if they were unlocked, she would quietly pop in, and see whether the cook's book of recipes was not somewhere about. If it was she would surely find in it the recipe for lobster *à la Riseholme*. A few minutes would suffice to copy it, and then tiptoeing out of the kitchen again, with the key to the mystery in her pocket, she would go round to the front door as cool as a cucumber, and ring the bell. Should Lucia (alone in the house and possibly practising for more do-di-mus) not hear the bell, she would simply postpone the eating of her humble pie till the next day. If, by ill chance, Lucia was in the garden and saw her approaching by this unusual route, nothing was easier than to explain that, returning from her walk, she thought she would look in to thank her for the *pâté* and ask if she might join her callisthenic class. Knowing that the servants were all out (she would glibly explain) she felt sure that the main gate on to the road would be locked, and therefore she tried the back way. . . . The whole formation of the scheme

was instantaneous; it was as if she had switched on the lights at the door of a long gallery, and found it lit from end to end.

Without hurrying at all she walked down the cinder path and tested the kitchen-door. It was unlocked, and she slipped in, closing it quietly behind her. In the centre of the kitchen, decked and ready for illumination, stood the Christmas-tree designed for the delectation of the choir-boys that evening, and the great kitchen-table, with its broad skirting of board half-way down the legs, had been moved away and stood on its side against the dresser in order to give more room for the tree. Elizabeth hardly paused a second to admire the tapers, the reflecting glass balls, the bright tinselly decorations, for she saw a small shelf of books on the wall opposite, and swooped like a merlin on it. There were a few trashy novels, there was a hymn-book and a prayer-book, and there was a thick volume, with no title on the back, bound in American cloth. She opened it and saw at once that her claws had at last gripped the prey, for on one page was pasted a cutting from the daily press concerning *œufs à l'aurore*, on the next was a recipe in manuscript for cheese straws. Rapidly she turned the leaves, and there manifest at last was the pearl of great price, lobster *à la Riseholme*. It began with the luscious words, "Take two hen lobsters."

Out came her pencil; that and a piece of paper in which had been wrapped a present for a choir-boy was all she needed. In a couple of minutes she had copied out the mystic spell, replaced the sacred volume on its shelf, and put in her pocket the information for which she had pined so long. "How odd," she cynically reflected, "that only yesterday I should have said to Diva that it must be a very horrid burglar who was so wicked as to steal things on Boxing Day. Now I'll go round to the front door."

At the moment when this Mephistophelian thought

came into her mind, she heard with a sudden stoppage of her heart-beat, a step on the crisp path outside, and the handle of the kitchen-door was turned. Elizabeth took one sideways stride behind the gaudy tree and, peering through its branches, saw Lucia standing at the entrance. Lucia came straight towards her, not yet perceiving that there was a Boxing Day burglar in her own kitchen, and stood admiring her tree. Then with a startled exclamation she called out, "Who's that?" and Elizabeth knew that she was discovered. Further dodging behind the decorated fir would be both undignified and ineffectual, however skilful her footwork.

"It's me, dear Lucia," she said. "I came to thank you in person for that delicious *pâté* and to ask if——"

From somewhere close outside there came a terrific roar and rush as of great water-floods released. Reunited for the moment by a startled curiosity, they ran together to the open door, and saw, already leaping across the road and over the hornbeam hedge, a solid wall of water.

"The bank has given way," cried Lucia. "Quick, into the house through the door in the kitchen, and up the stairs."

They fled back past the Christmas-tree, and tried the door into the house. It was locked: the servants had evidently taken this precaution before going out on their pleasuring.

"We shall be drowned," wailed Elizabeth, as the flood came foaming into the kitchen.

"Rubbish," cried Lucia. "The kitchen-table! We must turn it upside down and get on to it."

It was but the work of a moment to do this, for the table was already on its side, and the two stepped over the high boarding that ran round it. Would their weight be too great to allow it to float on the rushing water that now deepened rapidly in the kitchen? That

anxiety was short-lived, for it rose free from the floor and bumped gently into the Christmas-tree.

"We must get out of this," cried Lucia. "One doesn't know how much the water will rise. We may be drowned yet if the table legs come against the ceiling. Catch hold of the dresser and pull."

But there was no need for such exertion, for the flood, eddying fiercely round the submerged kitchen, took them out of the doors that it had flung wide, and in a few minutes they were floating away over the garden and the hornbeam hedge. The tide had evidently begun to ebb before the bank gave way, and now the kitchen-table, occasionally turning round in an eddy, moved off in the direction of Tilling and of the sea. Luckily it had not got into the main stream of the river but floated smoothly and swiftly along, with the tide and the torrent of the flood to carry it. Its two occupants, of course, had no control whatever over its direction, but soon, with an upspring of hope, they saw that the current was carrying it straight towards the steep slope above the Land-gate, where not more than a quarter of an hour ago Elizabeth had interchanged greetings and au reservoirs with her friends who had been looking at the widespread waters. Little had she thought that so soon she would be involved in literal reservoirs of the most gigantic sort—but this was no time for light conceits.

The company of Tillingites was still there when the bank opposite Grebe gave way. All but Georgie had heard the rush and roar of the released waters, but his eyes were sharper than others, and he had been the first to see where the disaster had occurred.

"Look, the bank opposite Grebe has burst!" he cried. "The road's under water, her garden's under water: the rooms downstairs must be flooded. I hope Lucia's upstairs, or she'll get dreadfully wet."

"And that road is Elizabeth's favourite walk," cried Diva. "She'll be on it now."

"But she walks so fast," said the Padre, forgetting to speak Scotch. "She'll be past Grebe by now, and above where the bank has burst."

"Oh dear, oh dear, and on Boxing Day!" wailed Mrs. Bartlett.

The huge flood was fast advancing on the town, but with this outlet over the fields, it was evident that it would get no deeper at Grebe, and that, given Lucia was upstairs and that Elizabeth had walked as fast as usual, there was no real anxiety for them. All eyes now watched the progress of the water. It rose like a wave over a rock when it came to the railway line that crossed the marsh and in a couple of minutes more it was foaming over the fields immediately below the town.

Again Georgie uttered woe like Cassandra.

"There's something coming," he cried. "It looks like a raft with its legs in the air. And there are two people on it. Now it's spinning round and round; now it's coming straight here ever so fast. There are two women, one without a hat. It's Them! It's Lucia and Miss Mapp! What *has* happened?"

The raft, with legs sometimes madly waltzing, sometimes floating smoothly along, was borne swiftly towards the bottom of the cliff, below which the flood was pouring by. The Padre, with his new umbrella, ran down the steps that led to the road below in order to hook it in, if it approached within umbrella-distance. On and on it came, now clearly recognizable as Lucia's great kitchen-table upside down, until it was within a yard or two of the bank. To attempt to wade out to it, for any effective purpose, was useless: the strongest would be swept away in such a headlong torrent, and even if he reached the raft there would be three helpless people on it instead of two and it would probably sink. To hook it with the umbrella was the only chance, for there was no time to get a boat-hook or a rope to throw out to the passengers. The Padre made a desperate lunge at it, slipped and fell flat into the water, and was

only saved from being carried away by clutching at the iron railing alongside the lowest of the submerged steps. Then some fresh current tweaked the table and, still moving in the general direction of the flood water, it sheered off across the fields. As it receded Lucia showed the real stuff of which she was made. She waved her hand and her clear voice rang out gaily across the waste of water.

"Au reservoir, all of you," she cried. "We'll come back: just wait till we come back," and she was seen to put her arm round the huddled form of Mapp, and comfort her.

The kitchen-table was observed by the watchers to get into the main channel of the river, where the water was swifter yet. It twirled round once or twice as if waving a farewell, and then shot off towards the sea and that great bank of thick mist which hung over the horizon.

There was not yet any reason to despair. A telephone-message was instantly sent to the fishermen at the port, another to the coast-guards, another to the lifeboat, that a kitchen-table with a cargo of ladies on it was coming rapidly down the river, and no effort must be spared to arrest its passage out to sea. But, one after the other, as the short winter afternoon waned, came discouraging messages from the coast. The flood had swept from their moorings all the fishing boats anchored at the port or drawn up on the shore above high-water mark, and a coast-guardsman had seen an unintelligible object go swiftly past the mouth of the river before the telephone-message was received. He could not distinguish what it was, for the fog out in the Channel had spread to the coastline, and it had seemed to him more like the heads and necks of four sea-serpents playing together than anything else. But when interrogated as to whether it might be the legs of a kitchen-table upside down he acknowledged that the short glimpse which he obtained of it before it got lost in the fog would suit a kitchen-

table as well as sea-serpents. He had said sea-serpents because it was in the sea, but it was just as like the legs of a kitchen-table, which had never occurred to him as possible. His missus had just such a kitchen-table—but as he seemed to be diverging into domestic reminiscences, the Mayor of Tilling, who himself conducted inquiries instead of opening the whist drive at the Institute with a short speech on the sin of gambling, cut him off. It was only too clear that this imaginative naturalist had seen—too late—the kitchen-table going out to sea.

The lifeboat had instantly responded to the S.O.S. call on its services, and the great torrent of the flood having now gone by, the crew had been able to launch the boat and had set off to search the English Channel, in the blinding fog, for the table. The tide was setting west down the coast, the flood pouring out from the river mouth was discharged east, but they had gone off to row about in every direction, where the kitchen-table might have been carried. Rockets had been sent up from the station in case the ladies didn't know where they were. That, so the Mayor reflected, might conceivably show the ladies where they were, but it didn't really enable them to get anywhere else.

Dusk drew on and the friends of the missing went back to their respective houses, for there was no good in standing about in this dreadful cold fog which had now crept up from the marsh. Pneumonia wouldn't help matters. Four of them, Georgie and Major Benjy and Diva and quaint Irene, lived solitary and celibate, and the prospect of a lonely evening with only suspense and faint hopes to feed upon was perfectly ghastly. In consequence, when each of them in turn was rung up by Mr. Wyse, who hoped, in a broken voice, that he might find them disengaged and willing to come round to his house for supper (not dinner), they all gladly accepted. Mr. Wyse requested them not to dress as for dinner, and this was felt to show a great delicacy: not

dressing would be a sort of symbol of their common anxiety. Supper would be at half-past eight, and Mr. Wyse trusted that there would be encouraging news before that hour.

The Padre and Mrs. Bartlett had been bidden as well, so that there was a supper-party of eight. Supper began with the most delicious caviare, and on the black oak mantelpiece were two threepenny Christmas cards. Susan helped herself plentifully to the caviare. There was no use in not eating.

"Dear Lucia's Christmas present to me," she said. "Hers and yours I should say, Mr. Georgie."

"Lucia sent me a wonderful box of nougat-chocolates," said Diva. "She and you, I mean, Mr. Georgie."

Major Benjy audibly gulped.

"Mrs. Lucia," he said, "if I may call her so, sent me half a dozen bottles of pre-war whisky."

The Padre had pulled himself together by this time, and spoke Scotch.

"I had a wee mischance wi' my umbrella two days agone," he said, "and Mistress Lucia, such a menseful woman, sent me a new one. An' now that's gone bobbin' out to sea."

"You're too pessimistic, Kenneth," said Mrs. Bartlett. "An umbrella soon gets waterlogged and sinks, I tell you. The chances are it will be picked up in the marsh to-morrow, and it'll find its way back to you, for there's that beautiful silver band on the handle with your name engraved on it."

"Eh, 'twould be a bonnie thing to recover it," said her husband.

Mr. Wyse thought that the conversation was getting a little too much concerned with minor matters; the recovery of an umbrella, though new, was a loss that might be lamented later. Besides, the other missing lady had not been mentioned yet. He pointed to the two threepenny Christmas cards on the mantelpiece.

"Our friend Elizabeth Mapp sent those to my wife and me yesterday," he said. "We shall keep them always among our most cherished possessions in case—I mean in any case. Pretty designs. Roofs covered with snow. Holly. Robins. She had a very fine artistic taste. Her pictures had always something striking and original about them."

Everybody cudgelled their brains for something appropriate to say about Elizabeth's connection with Art. The effort was quite hopeless, for her ignoble trick in rejecting Lucia's and Georgie's pictures for the last exhibition, and the rejection by the new committee of her own for the forthcoming exhibition were all that could occur to the most nimble brain, and while the artist was in direst peril on the sea, or possibly now at rest beneath it, it would be in the worst taste to recall those discordant incidents. A very long pause of silence followed, broken only by the crashing of toast in the mouths of those who had not yet finished their caviare.

Irene had eaten no caviare, nor hitherto had she contributed anything to the conversation. Now she suddenly burst into shrieks of hysterical laughter and sobs.

"What rubbish you're all talking," she cried, wiping her eyes. "How can you be so silly? I'm sure I beg your pardons, but there it is. I'll go home, please."

She fled from the room and banged the front door so loudly that the house shook, and one of Miss Mapp's cards fell into the fireplace.

"Poor thing. Very excitable and uncontrolled," said Susan. "But I think she's better alone."

There was a general feeling of relief that Irene had gone, and as Mrs. Wyse's excellent supper progressed, with its cold turkey and its fried slices of plum pudding, its toasted cheese and its figs stuffed with almonds sent by Amelia from Capri, the general numbness, caused

by the catastrophe began to pass off. Consumed with anxiety as all were for the two (especially one of them) who had vanished into the Channel fogs on so unusual a vehicle, they could not fail to recognize what problems of unparalleled perplexity and interest were involved in what all still hoped might not turn out to be a tragedy. But whether it proved so or not, the whole manner of these happenings, the cause, the conditions, the circumstances which led to the two unhappy ladies whisking by on the flood must be discussed, and presently Major Benjy broke into this unnatural reticence.

"I've seen many floods on the Jumna," he said, refilling his glass of port, "but I never saw one so sudden and so—so fraught with enigmas. They must have been in the kitchen. Now we all know there was a Christmas-tree there——"

A conversational flood equal to the largest ever seen on the Jumna was unloosed; a torrent of conjectures, and reconstruction after reconstruction of what could have occurred to produce what they had all seen, was examined and rejected as containing some inherent impossibility. And then what did the gallant Lucia's final words mean, when she said, "Just wait till we come back"? By now discussion had become absolutely untrammelled, the rivalry between the two, Miss Mapp's tricks and pointless meannesses, Lucia's scornful victories, and, no less, her domineering ways were openly alluded to.

"But 'Just wait till we come back' is what we're talking about," cried Diva. "We must keep to the point, Major Benjy. I believe she simply meant 'Don't give up hope. We *shall* come back.' And I'm sure they will."

"No, there's more in it than that," said Georgie, interrupting. "I know Lucia better than any of you. She meant that she had something frightfully interesting to tell us when she did come back, as of course she will, and I'd bet it was something about Elizabeth. Some new thing she'd found her out in."

"But at such a solemn moment," said the Padre, again forgetting his pseudo-Highland origin, "when they were being whirled out to sea with death staring them in the face, I hardly think that such trivialities as those which had undoubtedly before caused between those dear ladies the frictions which we all deplored——"

"Nonsense, Kenneth," said his wife, rather to his relief, for he did not know how he was to get out of this sentence, "you enjoyed those rows as much as anybody."

"I don't agree with you, Padre," said Georgie. "To begin with, I'm sure Lucia didn't think she was facing death and even if she did, she'd still have been terribly interested in life till she went phut."

"Thank God I live on a hill," exclaimed Major Benjy, thinking, as usual, of himself.

Mr. Wyse held up his hand. As he was the host, it was only kind to give him a chance, for he had had none as yet. "Your pardon," he said, "if I may venture to suggest what may combine the ideas of our reverend friend and of Mr. Pillson"—he made them two bows—"I think Mrs. Lucas felt she was facing death—who wouldn't?—but she was of that vital quality which never gives up interest in life, until, in fact (which we trust with her is not the case) all is over. But like a true Christian, she was, as we all saw, employed in comforting the weak. She could not have been using her last moments, which we hope are nothing of the sort, better. And if there had been frictions, they arose only from the contact of two highly vitalized——"

"She kissed Elizabeth too," cried Mrs. Bartlett. "I saw her. She hasn't done that for ages. Fancy!"

"I want to get back to the kitchen," said Diva. "What could have taken Elizabeth to the kitchen? I've got a brilliant idea, though I don't know what you'll think of it. She knew Lucia was giving a Christmas-tree to the choir-boys, because I told her so yesterday——"

"I wonder what's happened to that," said the Padre. "If it wasn't carried away by the flood, and I think we should have seen it go by, it might be dried."

Diva, as usual when interrupted, had held her mouth open, and went straight on.

"—and she knew the servants were out, because I'd told her that too, and she very likely wanted to see the Christmas-tree. So I suggest that she went round the back way into the kitchen—that would be extremely like her, you know—in order to have a look at it, without asking a favour of——"

"Well, I do call that clever," interrupted Georgie admiringly. "Go on. What happened next?"

Diva had not got further than that yet, but now a blinding brilliance illuminated her and she clapped her hands.

"I see, I see," she cried. "In she went into the kitchen and while she was looking at it, Lucia came in too, and then the flood came in too. All three of them. That would explain what was behind her words, 'Just wait till we come back.' She meant that she wanted to tell us that she'd found Elizabeth in her kitchen."

It was universally felt that Diva had hit it, and after such a stroke of reconstructive genius, any further discussion must be bathos. Instantly a sad reaction set in, and they all looked at each other much shocked to find how wildly interested they had become in these trivial affairs, while their two friends were, to put the most hopeful view of the case, on a kitchen-table somewhere in the English Channel. But still Lucia had said that she and her companion were coming back, and though no news had arrived of the castaways, every one of her friends, at the bottom of their hearts, felt that these were not idle words, and that they must keep alive their confidence in Lucia. Miss Mapp alone would certainly have been drowned long ago, but Lucia, whose power of resource all knew to be unlimited, was with

her. No one could suggest what she could possibly do in such difficult circumstances, but never yet had she been floored, nor failed to emerge triumphant from the most menacing situations.

Mrs. Wyse's cuckoo clock struck the portentous hour of 1 a.m. They all sighed, they all got up, they all said good night with melancholy faces, and groped their ways home in the cold fog. Above Georgie's head as he turned the corner by Mallards there loomed the gable of the garden-room, where so often a chink of welcoming light had shone between the curtains, as the sound of Mozartino came from within. Dark and full of suspense as was the present, he could still, without the sense of something for ever past from his life, imagine himself sitting at the piano again with Lucia, waiting for her Uno, due, TRE as they tried over for the first time the secretly familiar duets.

The whole of the next day this thick fog continued both on land and water, but no news came from seawards save the bleating and hooting of fog-horns, and as the hours passed, anxiety grew more acute. Mrs. Wyse opened the picture exhibition on behalf of Lucia, for it was felt that in any case she would have wished that, but owing to the extreme inclemency of the weather only Mr. Wyse and Georgie attended this inaugural ceremony. Mrs. Wyse in the lamented absence of the authoress read Lucia's lecture on modern Art from the typewritten copy which she had sent Georgie to look through and criticize. It lasted an hour and twenty minutes, and after Georgie's applause had died away at the end, Mr. Wyse read the speech he had composed to propose a vote of thanks to Lucia for her most enthralling address. This also was rather long, but written in the most classical and urbane style. Georgie seconded this in a shorter speech, and Mrs. Wyse (*vice* Lucia) read another longer speech of Lucia's which was appended in manuscript to her lecture, in which she thanked them for thanking her, and told them how diffident she had

felt in thus appearing before them. There was more applause, and then the three of them wandered round the room and peered at each other's pictures through the dense fog. Evening drew in again, without news, and Tilling began to fear the worst.

Next morning there came a mute and terrible message from the sea. The fog had cleared, the day was of crystalline brightness, and since air and exercise would be desirable after sitting at home all the day before, and drinking that wonderful pre-war whisky, Major Benjy set off by the eleven o'clock tram to play a round of golf with the Padre. Though hope was fast expiring, neither of them said anything definitely indicating that they no longer really expected to see their friends again, but there had been talk indirectly bearing on the catastrophe; the Major had asked casually whether Mallards was a freehold, and the Padre replied that both it and Grebe were the property of their occupiers and not held on lease; he also made a distant allusion to memorial services, saying he had been to one lately, very affecting. Then Major Benjy lost his temper with the caddie, and their game assumed a more normal aspect.

They had now come to the eighth hole, the tee of which was perched high like a pulpit on the sand-dunes and overlooked the sea. The match was most exciting: hole after hole had been halved in brilliant sixes and sevens, the players were both on the top of their form, and in their keenness had quite banished from their minds the overshadowing anxiety. Here Major Benjy topped his ball into a clump of bents immediately in front of the tee, and when he had finished swearing at his caddie for moving on the stroke, the Padre put his iron shot on to the green.

"A glorious day," he exclaimed, and, turning to pick up his clubs, gazed out seawards. The tide was low, and an immense stretch of "shining sands" as in Charles Kingsley's poem was spread in front of him. Then he gave a gasp.

"What's that?" he said to Major Benjy, pointing with a shaking finger.

"Good God," said Major Benjy. "Pick up my ball, caddie."

They scrambled down the steep dunes and walked across the sands to where lay this object which had attracted the Padre's attention. It was an immense kitchen-table upside down with its legs in the air, wet with brine but still in perfect condition. Without doubt it was the one which they had seen two days before whirling out to sea. But now it was by itself, no ladies were sitting upon it. The Padre bared his head.

"Shall we abandon our game, Major?" he said. "We had better telephone from the Club-house to the Mayor. And I must arrange to get some men to bring the table back. It's far too heavy for us to think of moving it."

The news that the table had come ashore spread swiftly through Tilling, and Georgie, hearing that the Padre had directed that when it had passed the Custom House it should be brought to the Vicarage, went round there at once. It seemed almost unfeeling in this first shock of bereavement to think about tables, but it would save a great deal of bother afterwards to see to this now. The table surely belonged to Grebe.

"I quite understand your point of view," he said to the Padre, "and of course what is found on the seashore in a general way belongs to the finder, if it's a few oranges in a basket, because nobody knows who the real owner is. But we all know, at least we're afraid we do, where this came from."

The Padre was quite reasonable.

"You mean it ought to go back to Grebe," he said. "Yes, I agree. Ah, I see it has arrived."

They went out into the street, where a trolly, bearing the table, had just drawn up. Then a difficulty arose.

It was late, and the bearers demurred to taking it all the way out to Grebe to-night and carrying it through the garden.

"Move it in here then for the night," said the Padre. "You can get it through the backyard and into the outhouse."

Georgie felt himself bound to object to this: the table belonged to Grebe, and it looked as if Grebe, alas, belonged to him.

"I think it had better come to Mallards Cottage," said he firmly. "It's only just round the corner, and it can stand in my yard."

The Padre was quite willing that it should go back to Grebe, but why should Georgie claim this object with all the painful interest attached to it? After all, he had found it.

"And so I don't quite see why you should have it," he said a little stiffly.

Georgie took him aside.

"It's dreadful to talk about it so soon," he said, "but that is what I should like done with it. You see Lucia left me Grebe and all its contents. I still cling—I can't help it—to the hope that neither it nor they may ever be mine, but in the interval which may elapse——"

"No! Really!" said the Padre with a sudden thrill of Tillingite interest which it was no use trying to suppress. "I congrat—— Well, well. Of course the kitchen-table is yours. Very proper."

The trolly started again and by dint of wheedlings and cunning coaxings the sad substantial relic was induced to enter the backyard of Mallards Cottage. Here for the present it would have to remain, but pickled as it was with long immersion in sea water, the open air could not possibly hurt it, and if it rained, so much the better, for it would wash the salt out.

Georgie, very tired and haggard with these harrowing arrangements, had a little rest on his sofa, when he had seen the table safely bestowed. His cook gave him a

succulent and most nutritious dinner by way of showing her sympathy, and Foljambe waited on him with peculiar attention, constantly holding a pocket handkerchief to the end of her nose, by way of expressing her own grief. Afterwards he moved to his sitting-room and took up his needlework, that "sad narcotic exercise," and looked his loss in the face.

Indeed, it was difficult to imagine what life would be like without Lucia, but there was no need to imagine it, for he was experiencing it already. There was nothing to look forward to, and he realized how completely Lucia and her manœuvres and her indomitable vitality and her deceptions and her greatnesses had supplied the salt to life. He had never been in the least in love with her, but somehow she had been as absorbing as any wayward and entrancing mistress. "It will be too dull for anything," thought he, "and there won't be a single day in which I shan't miss her most dreadfully. It's always been like that: when she was away from Riseholme, I never seemed to care to paint or to play, except because I should show her what I had done when she came back, and now she'll never come back."

He abandoned himself for quite a long time to despair with regard to what life would hold for him. Nobody else, not even Foljambe, seemed to matter at all. But then through the black, deep waters of his tribulation there began to appear little bubbles on the surface. It was like comparing a firefly with the huge night itself to weigh them against this all-encompassing darkness, but where for a moment each pricked the surface there was, it was idle to deny, just a spark that stood out momentarily against the blackness. The table, for instance: he would have a tablet fixed on to it, with a suitable inscription to record the tragic rôle it had played, a text, so to speak, as on a cenotaph. How would Lucia's last words do? "Just wait till we come back." But if this was a memorial table, it must record that Lucia was not coming back.

He fetched a writing-pad and began again. "This is the table——" but that wouldn't do. It suggested "This is the house that Jack built." Then, "It was upon this table on Boxing Day afternoon, 1930, that Mrs. Emmeline Lucas, of Grebe, and Miss Elizabeth Mapp, of Mallards——" that was too prolix. Then: "In memory of Emmeline Lucas and Elizabeth Mapp. They went to sea"—but that sounded like a nursery rhyme by Edward Lear, or it might suggest to future generations that they were sailors. Then he wondered if poetry would supply anything, and the lines, "And may there be no sadness of farewell, when I embark," occurred to him. But that wouldn't do: people would wonder why she had embarked on a kitchen-table, and even now, when the event was so lamentably recent, nobody actually knew.

"I hadn't any idea," thought Georgie, "how difficult it is to write a few well-chosen and heart-felt words. I shall go and look at the tombstones in the churchyard to-morrow. Lucia would have thought of something perfect at once."

Tiny as were these bubbles and others (larger ones) which Georgie refused to look at directly, they made a momentary, an evanescent brightness. Some of them made quite loud pops as they burst, and some presented problems. This catastrophe had conveyed a solemn warning against living in a house so low-lying, and Major Benjy had already expressed that sentiment when he gave vent to that self-centred *cri du cœur*, "Thank God I live on a hill," but for Georgie that question would soon become a practical one, though he would not attempt to make up his mind yet. It would be absurd to have two houses in Tilling, to be the tenant of Mallards Cottage, and the owner of Grebe. Or should he live in Grebe during the summer, when there was no fear of floods, and Mallards Cottage in the winter?

He got into bed: the sympathetic Foljambe, before going home had made a beautiful fire, and his hot-water

bottle was of such a temperature that he could not put his feet on it at all. . . . If he lived at Grebe she would only have to go back across the garden to her Cadman, if Cadman remained in his service. Then there was Lucia's big car. He supposed that would be included in the contents of Grebe. Then he must remember to put a black bow on Lucia's picture in the Art Exhibition. Then he got sleepy . . .