

## XIII

THE wretched Major Benjy, who had not been out all day except for interviews with agents and miserable traverses between his house and the doorsteps of Mallards, dined alone that night (if you could call it dinner) on a pork pie and a bottle of Burgundy. A day's hard work had restored the lots of his abandoned sale to their proper places, and a little glue had restored its eye to the bald tiger. He felt worse than bald himself, he felt flayed, and God above alone knew what fresh skinnings were in store for him. All Tilling must have had its telephone-bells (as well as the church bells) ringing from morning till night with messages of congratulation and suitable acknowledgments between the returned ladies and their friends, and he had never felt so much like a pariah before. Diva had just passed his windows (clearly visible in the lamplight, for he had not put up the curtains of his snugery yet) and he had heard her knock on the door of Mallards. She must have gone to dine with the fatal Elizabeth, and what were they talking about now? Too well he knew, for he knew Elizabeth.

If in spirit he could have been present in the dining-room, where only last night he had so sumptuously entertained Diva and Georgie and Mrs. Bartlett, and had bidden them punish the port, he would not have felt much more cheerful.

"In my best spare room, Diva, would you believe it?" said Elizabeth, "with all the drawers full of socks and shirts and false teeth, wasn't it so, Withers? and the cellar full of wine. What he has consumed of my things, goodness only knows. There was that *pâté*

which Lucia gave me only the day before we were whisked out to sea——”

“But that was three months ago,” said Diva.

“—and he used my coal and my electric light as if they were his own, not to mention firing,” said Elizabeth, going on exactly where she had left off, “and a whole row of beetroot.”

Diva was bursting to hear the story of the voyage. She knew that Georgie was dining with Lucia, and he would be telling everybody about it to-morrow, but if only Elizabeth would leave the beetroot alone and speak of the other she herself would be another focus of information instead of being obliged to listen to Georgie.

“Dear Elizabeth,” she said, “what does a bit of beetroot matter compared to what you’ve been through? When an old friend like you has had such marvellous experiences as I’m sure you must have, nothing else counts. Of course I’m sorry about your beetroot: most annoying, but I do want to hear about your adventures.”

“You’ll hear all about them soon,” said Elizabeth, “for to-morrow I’m going to begin a full history of it all. Then, as soon as it’s finished, I shall have a big tea-party, and instead of bridge afterwards I shall read it to you: That’s absolutely confidential, Diva. Don’t say a word about it, or Lucia may steal my idea or do it first.”

“Not a word,” said Diva. “But surely you can tell me some bits.”

“Yes, there is a certain amount which I shan’t mention publicly,” Elizabeth said. “Things about Lucia which I should never dream of stating openly.”

“Those are just the ones I should like to hear about most,” said Diva. “Just a few little titbits.”

Elizabeth reflected a moment.

“I don’t want to be hard on her,” she said, “for after all we were together, and what would have happened if I had not been there, I can’t think. A little off her head perhaps with panic: that is the most charitable

explanation. As we swept by the town on our way out to sea she shrieked out—perhaps you heard her—'Au reservoir : just wait till we come back.' Diva, I am not easily shocked, but I must say I was appalled. Death stared us in the face and all she could do was to make jokes! There was I sitting quiet and calm, preparing myself to meet the solemn moment as a Christian should, with this screaming hyæna for my companion. Then out we went to sea, in that blinding fog, tossing and pitching on the waves, till we went crash into the side of a ship which was invisible in the darkness."

"How awful!" said Diva. "I wonder you didn't upset."

"Certainly it was miraculous," said Elizabeth. "We were battered about, the blows against the table were awful, and if I hadn't kept my head and clung on to the ship's side, we must have upset. They had heard our calls by then, and I sprang on to the rope-ladder they put down, without a moment's pause, so as to lighten the table for Lucia, and then she came up too."

Elizabeth paused a moment.

"Diva, you will bear me witness that I always said, in spite of Amelia Faraglione, that Lucia didn't know a word of Italian, and it was proved I was right. It was an Italian boat, and our great Italian scholar was absolutely flummoxed, and the Captain had to talk to us in English. There!"

"Go on," said Diva breathlessly.

"The ship was a fishing trawler bound for the Gallagher Banks, and we were there for two months, and then we found another trawler on its way home to Tilling, and it was from that we landed this morning. But I shan't tell you of our life and adventures, for I'm reserving that for my reading to you."

"No, never mind then," said Diva. "Tell me intimate things about Lucia."

Elizabeth sighed.

"We mustn't judge anybody," she said, "and I won't :

but oh, the nature that revealed itself! The Italians were a set of coarse, lascivious men of the lowest type, and Lucia positively revelled in their society. Every day she used to walk about the deck, often with bare feet, and skip and do her callisthenics, and learn a few words of Italian; she sat with this one or that, with her fingers actually entwined with his, while he pretended to teach her to tie a knot or a clove-hitch or something that probably had an improper meaning as well. Such flirtation (at her age too), such promiscuousness, I have never seen. But I don't judge her, and I beg you won't."

"But didn't you speak to her about it?" asked Diva.

"I used to try to screw myself up to it," said Elizabeth, "but her lightness positively repelled me. We shared a cabin about as big as a dog kennel, and oh, the sleepless nights when I used to be thrown from the shelf where I lay! Even then she wanted to instruct me, and show me how to wedge myself in. Always that dreadful superior attitude, that mania to teach everybody everything except Italian, which we have so often deplored. But that was nothing. It was her levity from the time when the flood poured into the kitchen at Grebe——"

"Do tell me about that," cried Diva. "That's almost the most interesting thing of all. Why had she taken you into the kitchen?"

Elizabeth laughed.

"Dear thing!" she said. "What a lovely appetite you have for details! You might as well expect me to remember what I had for breakfast that morning. She and I had both gone into the kitchen; there we were, and we were looking at the Christmas-tree. Such a tawdry tinselly tree! Rather like her. Then the flood poured in, and I saw that our only chance was to embark on the kitchen-table. By the way, was it ever washed up?"

"Oh yes, without a scratch on it," said Diva, thinking of the battering it was supposed to have undergone against the side of the trawler . . .

Elizabeth had evidently not reckoned on its having come ashore, and rose.

"I am surprised that it didn't go to bits," she said. "But let us go into the garden-room. We must really talk about that wretched sponger next door. Is it true he's bought a motor-car out of the money he hoped my death would bring him? And all that wine: bottles and bottles, so Withers told me. Oceans of champagne. How is he to pay for it all now with his miserable little income' on which he used to pinch and scrape along before?"

"That's what nobody knows," said Diva. "An awful crash for him. So rash and hasty, as we all felt."

They settled themselves comfortably by the fire, after Elizabeth had had one peep between the curtains.

"I'm not the least sorry for having been a little severe with him this morning," she said. "Any woman would have done the same."

Withers entered with a note. Elizabeth glanced at the handwriting, and turned pale beneath the tan acquired on the cod-banks.

"From him," she said. "No answer, Withers."

"Shall I read it?" said Elizabeth, when Withers had left the room, "or throw it, as it deserves, straight into the fire."

"Oh, read it," said Diva, longing to know what was in it. "You must see what he has to say for himself."

Elizabeth adjusted her pince-nez and read it in silence.

"Poor wretch," she said. "But very proper as far as it goes. Shall I read it you?"

"Do, do, do," said Diva.

Elizabeth read:

"MY DEAR MISS ELIZABETH (if you will still permit me to call you so)——

"Very proper," said Diva.

"Don't interrupt, dear, or I shan't read it," said Elizabeth.

"—call you so. I want first of all to congratulate you with all my heart on your return after adventures and privations which I know you bore with Christian courage.

"Secondly I want to tender you my most humble apologies for my atrocious conduct in your absence, which was unworthy of a soldier and Christian, and, in spite of all, a gentleman. Your forgiveness, should you be so gracious as to extend it to me, will much mitigate my present situation.

"Most sincerely yours (if you will allow me to say so),  
" BENJAMIN FLINT."

"I call that very nice," said Diva. "He didn't find that easy to write!"

"And I don't find it very easy to forgive him," retorted Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth, you must make an effort," said Diva energetically. "Tilling society will all fly to smithereens if we don't take care. You and Lucia have come back from the dead, so that's a very good opportunity for showing a forgiving spirit and beginning again. He really can't say more than he has said."

"Nor could he possibly, if he's a soldier, a Christian and a gentleman, have said less," observed Elizabeth.

"No, but he's done the right thing."

Elizabeth rose and had one more peep out of the window.

"I forgive him," she said. "I shall ask him to tea to-morrow."

Elizabeth carried up to bed with her quantities of food for thought and lay munching it till a very late hour. She had got rid of a good deal of spite against Lucia, which left her head the clearer, and she would be very busy to-morrow writing her account of the great adventure. But it was the thought of Major Benjy that most occupied her. Time had been when he had certainly come very near making honourable proposals to her which she always was more than ready to accept.

They used to play golf together in those days before that firebrand Lucia descended on Tilling; he used to drop in casually, and she used to put flowers in his buttonhole for him. Tilling had expected their union, and Major Benjy had without doubt been on the brink. Now, she reflected, was the precise moment to extend to him a forgiveness so plenary that it would start a new chapter in the golden book of pardon. Though only this morning she had ejected his golf-clubs and his socks and his false teeth with every demonstration of contempt, this appeal of his revived in her hopes that had hitherto found no fruition. There should be fatted calves for him as for a prodigal son, he should find in this house that he had violated a cordiality and a welcome for the future and an oblivion of the past that could not fail to undermine his celibate propensities. Discredited owing to his precipitate occupation of Mallards, humiliated by his degrading expulsion from it, and impoverished by the imprudent purchase of wines, motor-car and steel-shafted drivers, he would surely take advantage of the wonderful opportunity which she presented to him. He might be timid at first, unable to believe the magnitude of his good fortune, but with a little tact, a proffering of saucers of milk, so to speak, as to a stray and friendless cat, with comfortable invitations to sweet Pussie to be fed and stroked, with stealthy butterings of his paws, and with, frankly, a sudden slam of the door when sweet Pussie had begun to make himself at home, it seemed that unless Pussie was a lunatic, he could not fail to wish to domesticate himself. "I think I can manage it," thought Elizabeth, "and then poor Lulu will only be a widow and I a married woman with a well-controlled husband. How will she like that?"

Such sweet thoughts as these gradually lulled her to sleep.

It was soon evident that the return of the lost, an

event in itself of the first magnitude, was instantly to cause a revival of those rivalries which during the autumn had rendered life at Tilling so thrilling a business. Georgie, walking down to see Lucia three days after her return, found a bill-poster placarding the High Street with notices of a lecture to be delivered at the Institute in two days' time by Mrs. Lucas, admission free and no collection of any sort before, during, or after. "A modern Odyssey" was the title of the discourse. He hurried on to Grebe, and found her busy correcting the typewritten manuscript which she had been dictating to her secretary all yesterday with scarcely a pause for meals.

"Why, I thought it was to be just an after-dinner reading," he said, straight off, without any explanation of what he was talking about.

Lucia put a paper-knife in the page she was at, and turned back to the first.

"My little room would not accommodate all the people who, I understand, are most eager to hear about what I went through," she said. "You see, Georgie, I think it is a duty laid upon those who have been privileged to pass unscathed through tremendous adventures to let others share, as far as is possible, their experiences. In fact that is how I propose to open my lecture. I was reading the first sentence. What do you think of it?"

"Splendid," said Georgie. "So well expressed."

"Then I make some allusion to Nansen, and Stanley and Amundsen," said Lucia, "who have all written long books about their travels, and say that as I do not dream of comparing my adventure to theirs, a short verbal recital of some of the strange things that happened to me will suffice. I calculate that it will not take much more than two hours, or at most two and a half. I finished it about one o'clock this morning."

"Well, you have been quick about it," said Georgie. "Why, you've only been back three days."

Lucia pushed the pile of typewritten sheets aside.



"Georgie, it has been terrific work," she said, "but I had to rid myself of the incubus of these memories by writing them down. Aristotle, you know; the purging of the mind. Besides, I'm sure I'm right in hurrying up. It would be like Elizabeth to be intending to do something of the sort. I've hired the Institute anyhow——"

"Now that is interesting," said Georgie. "Practically every time that I've passed Mallards during these last two days Elizabeth has been writing in the window of the garden-room. Frightfully busy: hardly looking up at all. I don't know for certain that she is writing her *Odyssey*—such a good title—but she is writing something, and surely it must be that. And two of those times Major Benjy was sitting with her on the piano-stool and she was reading to him from a pile of blue foolscap. Of course I couldn't hear the words, but there were her lips going on like anything. So busy that she didn't see me, but I think he did."

"No!" said Lucia, forgetting her lecture for the moment. "Has she made it up with him then?"

"She must have. He dined there once, for I saw him going in, and he lunched there once, for I saw him coming out, and then there was tea, when she was reading to him, and I passed them just now in his car. All their four hands were on the wheel, and I think he was teaching her to drive, or perhaps learning himself."

"And fancy his forgiving all the names she called him, and putting his teeth on the doorstep," said Lucia. "I believe there's more than meets the eye."

"Oh, much more," said he. "You know she wanted to marry him and nearly got him, Diva says, just before we came here. She's having another go."

"Clever of her," said Lucia appreciatively. "I didn't think she had so much ability. She's got him on the hop, you see, when he's ever so grateful for her forgiving him. But cunning, Georgie, rather low and cunning. And it's quite evident she's writing our

adventures as hard as she can. It's a good thing I've wasted no time."

"I should like to see her face when she comes back from her drive," said Georgie. "They were pasting the High Street with you, as I came. Friday afternoon, too: that's a good choice because it's early closing."

"Yes, of course, that's why I chose it," said Lucia. "I don't think she can possibly be ready a whole day before me, and if she hires the Institute the day after me, nobody will go, because I shall have told them everything already. Then she can't have hired the Institute on the same day as I, because you can't have two lectures, especially on the same subject, going on in the same room simultaneously. Impossible."

Grosvenor came in with the afternoon post.

"And one by hand, ma'am," she said.

Lucia, of course, looked first at the one by hand. Nothing that came from outside Tilling could be as urgent as a local missive.

"Georgie!" she cried. "Delicious complication! Elizabeth asks me—me—to attend her reading in the garden-room called 'Lost to Sight,' at three o'clock on Friday afternoon. Major Benjamin Flint has kindly consented to take the chair. At exactly that hour the Padre will be taking the chair at the Institute for me. I know what I shall do. I shall send a special invitation to Elizabeth to sit on the platform at my lecture, and I shall send another note to her two hours later as if I had only just received hers, to say that as I am lecturing myself that afternoon at the Institute, I much regret that, etc. Then she can't say I haven't asked her."

"And when they come back from their drive this afternoon, she and Major Benjy," cried Georgie, "they'll see the High Street placarded with your notices. I've never been so excited before except when you came home."

The tension next day grew very pleasant. Elizabeth, hearing that Lucia had taken the Institute, did her best

to deprive her of an audience, and wrote personal notes not only to her friends of the immediate circle, but to chemists and grocers and auctioneers and butchers to invite them to the garden-room at Mallards at three o'clock on the day of battle in order to hear a *true* (underlined) account of her adventure. Lucia's reply to that was to make a personal canvass of all the shops, pay all her bills, and tell everyone that in the interval between the two sections of her lecture, tea would be provided gratis for the audience. She delayed this manœuvre till Friday morning, so that there could scarcely be a counter-attack.

That same morning, the Padre, feeling that he must do his best to restore peace after the engagement that was now imminent, dashed off two notes to Lucia and Elizabeth, saying that a few friends (this was a lie because he had thought of it himself) had suggested to him how suitable it would be that he should hold a short service of thanksgiving for their escape from the perils of the sea and of cod-fisheries. He proposed therefore that this service should take place directly after the baptisms on Sunday afternoon. It would be quite short, a few prayers, the general thanksgiving, a hymn (" Fierce raged the tempest o'er the deep "), and a few words from himself. He hoped the two ladies would sit together in the front pew which had been occupied at the memorial service by the chief mourners. Both of them were charmed with the idea, for neither dared refuse for fear of putting herself in the wrong. So after about three-forty-five on Sunday afternoon (and it was already two-forty-five on Friday afternoon) there must be peace, for who could go on after that joint thanksgiving?

By three o'clock on Friday there was not a seat to be had at the Institute, and many people were standing. At the same hour every seat was to be had at the garden-room, for nobody was sitting down in any of them. At half-past three Lucia was getting rather mixed about the latitude and longitude of the Gallagher Bank, and the

map had fallen down. At half-past three Elizabeth and Major Benjy were alone in the garden-room. It would be fatiguing for her, he said, to read again the lecture she had read him yesterday, and he wouldn't allow her to do it. Every word was already branded on his memory. So they seated themselves comfortably by the fire and Elizabeth began to talk of the loneliness of loneliness and of affinities. At half-past four Lucia's audience, having eaten their sumptuous tea, had ebbed away, leaving only Irene, Georgie, Mr. and Mrs. Wyse, and Mr. and Mrs. Padre to listen to the second half of the lecture. At half-past four in the garden-room Elizabeth and Major Benjy were engaged to be married. There was no reason for (in fact every reason against) a long engagement, and the banns would be put up in church next Sunday morning.

"So they'll all know about it, Benjino mio," said Elizabeth, "when we have our little thanksgiving service on Sunday afternoon, and I shall ask all our friends, Lucia included, to a cosy lunch on Monday to celebrate our engagement. You must send me across some of your best bottles of wine, dear."

"As if you didn't know that all my cellar was at your disposal," said he.

Elizabeth jumped up and clapped her hands.

"Oh, I've got such a lovely idea for that lunch," she said. "Don't ask me about it, for I shan't tell you. A splendid surprise for everybody, especially Lulu."

Elizabeth was slightly chagrined next day, when she offered to read her lecture on practically any afternoon to the inmates of the workhouse, to find that Lucia had already asked all those who were not bedridden or deaf to tea at Grebe that very day, and hear an abridged form of what she had read at the Institute: an hour was considered enough, since perhaps some of them would find the excitement and the strain of a longer intellectual effort too much for them. But this chagrin

was altogether wiped from her mind when on Sunday morning at the end of the second lesson the Padre published banns of marriage. An irrepressible buzz of conversation like a sudden irruption of blue-bottle flies filled the church, and Lucia, who was sitting behind the choir and assisting the altos, said "I thought so" in an audible voice. Elizabeth was assisting the trebles on the cantoris side, and had she not been a perfect lady, and the scene a sacred edifice, she might have been tempted to put out her tongue or make a face in the direction of the decani altos. Then in the afternoon came the service of thanksgiving, and the two heroines were observed to give each other a stage kiss. Diva, who sat in the pew immediately behind them, was certain that actual contact was not established. They resumed their seats, slightly apart.

As was only to be expected, notes of congratulation and acceptance to the lunch on Monday poured in upon the young couple. All the intimate circle of Tilling was there, the sideboard groaned with Major Benjy's most expensive wines, and everyone felt that the hatchet which had done so much interesting chopping in the past was buried, for never had two folk been so cordial to each other as were Lucia and Elizabeth.

They took their places at the table. Though it was only lunch there were menu cards, and written on them as the first item of the banquet was "*Lobster à la Riseholme.*"

Georgie saw it first, though his claim was passionately disputed by Diva, but everybody else, except Lucia, saw it in a second or two and the gay talk dropped dead. What could have happened? Had Lucia, one day on the Gallagher Banks, given their hostess the secret which she had so firmly withheld? Somehow it seemed scarcely credible. The eyes of the guests, pair by pair, grew absorbed in meditation, for all were beginning to recall a mystery that had baffled them. The presence of Elizabeth in Lucia's kitchen when the flood poured in

had never been fathomed, but surely. . . . A slight catalepsy seized the party, and all eyes were turned on Lucia who now for the first time looked at the menu. If she had given the recipe to Elizabeth, she would surely say something about it.

Lucia read the menu and slightly moistened her lips. She directed on Elizabeth a long penetrating gaze that mutely questioned her. Then the character of that look altered. There was no reproach in it, only comprehension and unfathomable contempt.

The ghastly silence continued as the lobster was handed round. It came to Lucia first. She tasted it and found that it was exactly right. She laid down her fork, and grubbed up the imperfectly buried hatchet.

"Are you sure you copied the recipe out quite correctly, Elizabetha mia?" she asked. "You must pop into my kitchen some afternoon when you are going for your walk—never mind if I am in or not—and look at it again. And if my cook is out too, you will find the recipe in a book on the kitchen-shelf. But you know that, don't you?"

"Thank you, dear," said Elizabeth. "Sweet of you."

Then everybody began to talk in a great hurry.