

## II

THEY arrived at Tilling in the middle of the afternoon, entering it from the long level road that ran across the reclaimed marsh-land to the west. Blue was the sky overhead, complete with larks and small white clouds; the town lay basking in the hot June sunshine, and its narrow streets abounded in red-brick houses with tiled roofs, that shouted Queen Anne and George I in Lucia's enraptured ears, and made Georgie's fingers itch for his sketching-tools.

"Dear Georgie, perfectly enchanting!" exclaimed Lucia. "I declare I feel at home already. Look, there's another lovely house. We must just drive to the end of this street, and then we'll inquire where Mallards is. The people, too, I like their looks. Faces full of interest. It's as if they expected us."

The car had stopped to allow a dray to turn into the High Street from a steep cobbled way leading to the top of the hill. On the pavement at the corner was standing quite a group of Tillingites: there was a clergyman, there was a little round bustling woman dressed in a purple frock covered with pink roses which looked as if they were made of chintz, there was a large military-looking man with a couple of golf-clubs in his hand, and there was a hatless girl with hair closely cropped, dressed in a fisherman's jersey and knickerbockers, who spat very neatly in the roadway.

"We must ask where the house is," said Lucia, leaning out of the window of her Rolls-Royce. "I wonder if you would be so good as to tell me——"

The clergyman sprang forward.

"It'll be Miss Mapp's house you're seeking," he said

in a broad Scotch accent. "Straight up the street, to yon corner, and it's richt there is Mistress Mapp's house."

The odd-looking girl gave a short hoot of laughter, and they all stared at Lucia. The car turned with difficulty and danced slowly up the steep narrow street.

"Georgie, he told me where it was before I asked," said Lucia. "It must be known in Tilling, that I was coming. What a strange accent that cle.gyman had! A little tipsy, do you think, or only Scotch? The others too! all most interesting and unusual. Gracious, here's an enormous car coming down. Can we pass, do you think?"

By means of both cars driving on to the pavement on each side of the cobbled roadway, the passage was effected, and Lucia caught sight of a large woman inside the other, who in spite of the heat of the day wore a magnificent sable cloak. A small man with a monocle sat eclipsed by her side. Then, with glimpses of more red-brick houses to right and left, the car stopped at the top of the street opposite a very dignified door. Straight in front where the street turned at a right angle, a room with a large bow-window faced them; this, though slightly separate from the house, seemed to belong to it. Georgie thought he saw a woman's face peering out between half-drawn curtains, but it whisked itself away.

"Georgie, a dream," whispered Lucia, as they stood on the doorstep waiting for their ring to be answered. "That wonderful chimney, do you see, all crooked. The church, the cobbles, the grass and dandelions growing in between them. . . . Oh, is Miss Mapp in? Mrs. Lucas. She expects me."

They had hardly stepped inside, when Miss Mapp came hurrying in from a door in the direction of the bow-window where Georgie had thought he had seen a face peeping out.

"Dear Mrs. Lucas," she said. "No need for introductions, which makes it all so happy, for how well I remember you at Riseholme, your lovely Riseholme.

And Mr. Pillson! Your wonderful garden-party! All so vivid still. Red-letter days! Fancy your having driven all this way to see my little cottage! Tea at once, Withers, please. In the garden-room. Such a long drive, but what a heavenly day for it. I got your telegram at breakfast-time this morning. I could have clapped my hands for joy at the thought of possibly having such a tenant as Mrs. Lucas of Riseholme. But let us have a cup of tea first. Your chauffeur? Of course he will have his tea here, too. Withers: Mrs. Lucas's chauffeur. Mind you take care of him."

Miss Mapp took Lucia's cloak from her, and still keeping up an effortless flow of hospitable monologue, led them through a small panelled parlour which opened on to the garden. A flight of eight steps with a canopy of wistaria overhead led to the garden-room.

"My little plot," said Miss Mapp. "Very modest, as you see, three-quarters of an acre at the most, but well screened. My flower-beds: sweet roses, tortoiseshell butterflies. Rather a nice clematis. My Little Eden I call it, so small, but so well beloved."

"Enchanting!" said Lucia, looking round the garden before mounting the steps up to the garden-room door. There was a very green and well-kept lawn, set in bright flower-beds. A trellis at one end separated it from a kitchen-garden beyond, and round the rest ran high brick walls, over which peered the roofs of other houses. In one of these walls was cut a curved archway with a della Robbia head above it.

"Shall we just pop across the lawn," said Miss Mapp, pointing to this, "and peep in there while Withers brings our tea? Just to stretch the—the limbs, Mrs. Lucas, after your long drive. There's a wee little plot beyond there which is quite a pet of mine. And here's sweet Puss-Cat come to welcome my friends. Lamb! Love-bird!"

Love-bird's welcome was to dab rather crossly at the caressing hand which its mistress extended, and to trot

away to ambush itself beneath some fine hollyhocks, where it regarded them with singular disfavour.

"My little secret garden," continued Miss Mapp as they came to the archway. "When I am in here and shut the door, I mustn't be disturbed for anything less than a telegram. A rule of the house: I am very strict about it. The tower of the church keeping watch, as I always say over my little nook, and taking care of me. Otherwise not overlooked at all. A little paved walk round it, you see, flower-beds, a pocket-handkerchief of a lawn, and in the middle a pillar with a bust of good Queen Anne. Picked it up in a shop here for a song. One of my lucky days."

"Oh Georgie, isn't it too sweet?" cried Lucia. "Un giardino segreto. Molto bello!"

Miss Mapp gave a little purr of ecstasy.

"How lovely to be able to talk Italian like that," she said. "So pleased you like my little . . . giardino segreto, was it? Now shall we have our tea, for I'm sure you want refreshment, and see the house afterwards? Or would you prefer a little whisky and soda, Mr. Pillson? I shan't be shocked. Major Benjy—I should say Major Flint—often prefers a small whisky and soda to tea on a hot day after his game of golf, when he pops in to see me and tell me all about it."

The intense interest in humankind, so strenuously cultivated at Riseholme, obliterated for a moment Lucia's appreciation of the secret garden.

"I wonder if it was he whom we saw at the corner of the High Street," she said. "A big soldier-like man, with a couple of golf-clubs."

"How you hit him off in a few words," said Miss Mapp admiringly. "That can be nobody else but Major Benjy. Going off no doubt by the steam-tram (most convenient, lands you close to the links) for a round of golf after tea. I told him it would be far too hot to play earlier. I said I should scold him if he was naughty and played after lunch. He served for many years in India. Hindustanee

is quite a second language to him. Calls 'quai-hai' when he wants his breakfast. Volumes of wonderful diaries, which we all hope to see published some day. His house is next to mine down the street. Lots of tiger-skins. A rather impetuous bridge-player: quite wicked sometimes. You play bridge of course, Mrs. Lucas. Plenty of that in Tilling. Some good players."

They had strolled back over the lawn to the garden-room where Withers was laying tea. It was cool and spacious, one window was shaded with the big leaves of a fig-tree, through which, unseen, Miss Mapp so often peered out to see whether her gardener was idling. Over the big bow-window looking on to the street one curtain was half-drawn, a grand piano stood near it, book-cases half-lined the walls, and above them hung many water-colour sketches of the sort that proclaims a domestic origin. Their subjects also bewrayed them, for there was one of the front of Miss Mapp's house, and one of the secret garden, another of the crooked chimney, and several of the church tower looking over the house-roofs on to Miss Mapp's lawn.

Though she continued to spray on her visitors a perpetual shower of flattering and agreeable trifles, Miss Mapp's inner attention was wrestling with the problem of how much a week, when it came to the delicate question of terms for the rent of her house, she should ask Lucia. The price had not been mentioned in her advertisement in *The Times*, and though she had told the local house-agent to name twelve guineas a week, Lucia was clearly more than delighted with what she had seen already, and it would be a senseless Quixotism to let her have the house for twelve, if she might, all the time, be willing to pay fifteen. Moreover, Miss Mapp (from behind the curtain where Georgie had seen her) was aware that Lucia had a Rolls-Royce car, so that a few additional guineas a week would probably be of no significance to her. Of course, if Lucia was not enthusiastic about the house as well as the garden, it might be unwise to ask

fifteen, for she might think that a good deal, and would say something tiresome about letting Miss Mapp hear from her when she got safe away back to Rischolme, and then it was sure to be a refusal. But if she continued to rave and talk Italian about the house when she saw over it, fifteen guineas should be the price. And not a penny of that should Messrs. Woolgar and Pipstow, the house-agents, get for commission, since Lucia had said definitely that she saw the advertisement in *The Times*. That was Miss Mapp's affair: nothing to do with Woolgar and Pipstow. Meantime she begged Georgie not to look at those water-colours on the walls.

"Little daubs of my own," she said, most anxious that this should be known. "I should sink into the ground with shame, dear Mr. Pillson, if you looked at them, for I know what a great artist you are yourself. And Withers has brought us our tea. . . . You like the one of my little giardino segreto? (I must remember that beautiful phrase). How kind of you to say so! Perhaps it isn't quite so bad as the others, for the subject inspired me, and it's so important, isn't it, to love your subject? Major Benjy likes it too. Cream, Mrs. Lucas? I see Withers has picked some strawberries for us from my little plot. Such a year for strawberries! And Major Benjy was chatting with friends I'll be bound, when you passed him."

"Yes, a clergyman," said Lucia, "who kindly directed us to your house. In fact he seemed to know we were going there before I said so, didn't he, Georgie? A broad Scotch accent."

"Dear Padre!" said Miss Mapp. "It's one of his little ways to talk Scotch, though he came from Birmingham. A very good bridge-player when he can spare time as he usually can. Reverend Kenneth Bartlett. Was there a teeny little thin woman with him like a mouse? It would be his wife."

"No, not thin, at all," said Lucia thoroughly interested. "Quite the other way round: in fact round. A purple

coat and a shirt covered with pink roses that looked as if they were made of chintz."

Miss Mapp nearly choked over her first sip of tea, but just saved herself.

"I declare I'm quite frightened of you, Mrs. Lucas," she said. "What an eye you've got. Dear Diva Plaistow, whom we're all devoted to. Christened Godiva! Such a handicap! And they *were* chintz roses, which she cut out of an old pair of curtains and tacked them on. She's full of absurd delicious fancies like that. Keeps us all in fits of laughter. Anyone else?"

"Yes, a girl with no hat and an Eton crop. She was dressed in a fisherman's jersey and knickerbockers."

Miss Mapp looked pensive.

"Quaint Irene," she said. "Irene Coles. Just a touch of unconventionality, which sometimes is very refreshing, but can be rather embarrassing. Devoted to her art. She paints strange pictures, men and women with no clothes on. One has to be careful to knock when one goes to see quaint Irene in her studio. But a great original."

"And then when we turned up out of the High Street," said Georgie eagerly, "we met another Rolls-Royce. I was afraid we shouldn't be able to pass it."

"So was I," said Miss Mapp unintentionally betraying the fact that she had been watching from the garden-room. "That car is always up and down this street here."

"A large woman in it," said Lucia. "Wrapped in sables on this broiling day. A little man beside her."

"Mr. and Mrs. Wyse," said Miss Mapp. "Lately married. She was Mrs. Poppit, M.B.E. Very worthy, and such a crashing snob."

As soon as tea was over and the inhabitants of Tilling thus plucked and roasted, the tour of the house was made. There were charming little panelled parlours with big windows letting in a flood of air and sunshine and vases of fresh flowers on the tables. There was a broad stair-

case with shallow treads, and every moment Lucia became more and more enamoured of the plain well-shaped rooms. It all looked so white and comfortable, and, for one wanting a change, so different from the Hurst with its small latticed windows, its steep irregular stairs, its single steps, up or down, at the threshold of every room. People of the age of Anne seemed to have a much better idea of domestic convenience, and Lucia's Italian exclamations grew gratifyingly frequent. Into Miss Mapp's own bedroom she went alone with the owner, leaving Georgie on the landing outside, for delicacy would not permit his looking on the scene where Miss Mapp nightly disrobed herself, and the bed where she nightly disposed herself. Besides, it would be easier for Lucia to ask that important point-blank question of terms, and for herself to answer it if they were alone.

"I'm charmed with the house," said Lucia. "And what exactly, how much I mean, for a period of two months——"

"Fifteen guineas a week," said Miss Mapp without pause. "That would include the use of my piano. A sweet instrument by Blumenfelt."

"I will take it for August and September," said Lucia.

"And I'm sure I hope you'll be as pleased with it," said Miss Mapp, "as I'm sure I shall be with my tenant."

A bright idea struck her, and she smiled more widely than ever.

"That would not include, of course, the wages of my gardener, such a nice steady man," she said, "or garden-produce. Flowers for the house by all means, but not fruit or vegetables."

At that moment Lucia, blinded by passion for Mallards, Tilling and the Tillingites, would have willingly agreed to pay the water-rate as well. If Miss Mapp had guessed that, she would certainly have named this unusual condition.

Miss Mapp, as requested by Lucia, had engaged rooms for her and Georgie at a pleasant hostelry near by, called



the "Trader's Arms," and she accompanied them there with Lucia's car following, like an empty carriage at a funeral, to see that all was ready for them. There must have been some misunderstanding of the message, for Georgie found that a double bedroom had been provided for them. Luckily Lucia had lingered outside with Miss Mapp, looking at the view over the marsh, and Georgie with embarrassed blushes explained at the bureau that this would not do at all, and the palms of his hands got cold and wet until the mistake was erased and remedied. Then Miss Mapp left them and they went out to wander about the town. But Mallards was the magnet for Lucia's enamoured eye, and presently they stole back towards it. Many houses apparently were to be let furnished in Tilling just now, and Georgie too grew infected with the desire to have one. Riseholme would be very dismal without Lucia, for the moment the fête was over he felt sure that an appalling reaction after the excitement would settle on it; he might even miss being knighted. He had sketched everything sketchable, there would be nobody to play duets with, and the whole place would stagnate again until Lucia's return, just as it had stagnated during her impenetrable widowhood. Whereas here there were innumerable subjects for his brush, and Lucia would be installed in Mallards with a Blumenfelt in the garden-room, and, as was already obvious, a maelstrom of activities whirling in her brain. Major Benjy interested her, so did quaint Irene and the Padre, all the group, in fact, which had seen them drive up with such pre-knowledge, so it seemed, of their destination.

The wall of Miss Mapp's garden, now known to them from inside, ran up to where they now stood, regarding the front of Mallards, and Georgie suddenly observed that just beside them was the sweetest little gabled cottage with the board announcing that it was to be let furnished.

"Look, Lucia," he said. "How perfectly fascinating! If it wasn't for that blasted fête, I believe I should be

tempted to take it, if I could get it for the couple of months when you are here."

Lucia had been waiting just for that. She was intending to hint something of the sort before long unless he did, and had made up her mind to stand treat for a bottle of champagne at dinner, so that when they strolled about again afterwards, as she was quite determined to do, Georgie, adventurous with wine might find the light of the late sunset glowing on Georgian fronts in the town and on the levels of the surrounding country, quite irresistible. But how wise to have waited, so that Georgie should make the suggestion himself.

"My dear, what a delicious idea!" she said. "Are you really thinking of it? Heavenly for me to have a friend here instead of being planted among strangers. And certainly it is a darling little house. It doesn't seem to be occupied, no smoke from any of the chimneys. I think we might really peep in through the windows and get some idea of what it's like."

They had to stand on tiptoe to do this, but by shading their eyes from the westerly sun they could get a very decent idea of the interior.

"This must be the dining-room," said Georgie, peering in.

"A lovely open fire-place," said Lucia. "So cosy."

They moved on sideways like crabs.

"A little hall," said Lucia. "Pretty staircase going up out of it."

More crab-like movements.

"The sitting-room," said Georgie. "Quite charming, and if you press your nose close you can see out of the other window into a tiny garden beyond. The wooden paling must be that of your kitchen-garden."

They stepped back into the street to get a better idea of the topography, and at this moment Miss Mapp looked out of the bow-window of her garden-room and saw them there. She was as intensely interested in this as they in the house.

"And three bedrooms I should think upstairs," said Lucia, "and two attics above. Heaps."

"I shall go and see the agent to-morrow morning," said Georgie. "I can imagine myself being very comfortable there!"

They strolled off into the disused graveyard round the church. Lucia turned to have one more look at the front of Mallards, and Miss Mapp made a low swift curtsy, remaining down so that she disappeared completely.

"About that old fête," said Georgie, "I don't want to throw Daisy over, because she'll never get another Drake."

"But you can go down there for the week," said Lucia who had thought it all out, "and come back as soon as it's over. You know how to be knighted by now. You needn't go to all those endless rehearsals. Georgie, look at that wonderful clock on the church."

"Lovely," said Georgie absently. "I told Daisy I simply would not be knighted every day. I shall have no shoulder left."

"And I think that must be the town hall," said Lucia. "Quite right about not being knighted so often. What a perfect sketch you could do of that."

"Heaps of room for us all in the cottage," said Georgie. "I hope there's a servants' sitting-room."

"They'll be in and out of Mallards all day," said Lucia. "A lovely servants' hall there."

"If I can get it, I will," said Georgie. "I shall try to let my house at Riseholme, though I shall take my bibe-lots away. I've often had applications for it in other years. I hope Foljambe will like Tilling. She will make me miserable if she doesn't. Tepid water, fluff on my clothes."

It was time to get back to their inn to unpack, but Georgie longed for one more look at his cottage, and Lucia for one at Mallards. Just as they turned the corner that brought them in sight of these there was thrust out of the window of Miss Mapp's garden-room a hand

that waved a white handkerchief. It might have been samite.

"Georgie, what can that be?" whispered Lucia. "It must be a signal of some sort. Or was it Miss Mapp waving us good night?"

"Not very likely," said he. "Let's wait one second."

He had hardly spoken when Miss Coles, followed by the breathless Mrs. Plaistow hurried up the three steps leading to the front door of Mallards and entered.

"Diva and quaint Irene," said Lucia. "It must have been a signal."

"It might be a coincidence," said Georgie. To which puerile suggestion Lucia felt it was not worth while to reply.

Of course it was a signal and one long prearranged, for it was a matter of the deepest concern to several householders in Tilling, whether Miss Mapp found a tenant for Mallards, and she had promised Diva and quaint Irene to wave a handkerchief from the window of the garden-room at six o'clock precisely, by which hour it was reasonable to suppose that her visitors would have left her. These two ladies, who would be prowling about the street below, on the look out, would then hasten to hear the best or the worst.

Their interest in the business was vivid, for if Miss Mapp succeeded in letting Mallards, she had promised to take Diva's house, Wasters, for two months at eight guineas a week (the house being much smaller) and Diva would take Irene's house, Taormina (smaller still) at five guineas a week, and Irene would take a four-roomed labourer's cottage (unnamed) just outside the town at two guineas a week, and the labourer, who, with his family would be harvesting in August and hop-picking in September, would live in some sort of shanty and pay no rent at all. Thus from top to bottom of this ladder of lessors and lessees they all scored, for they all received more than they paid, and all would enjoy the benefit of

a change without the worry and expense of travel and hotels. Each of these ladies would wake in the morning in an unfamiliar room, would sit in unaccustomed chairs, read each other's books (and possibly letters), look at each other's pictures, imbibe all the stimulus of new surroundings, without the wrench of leaving Tilling at all. No true Tillingite was ever really happy away from her town; foreigners were very queer untrustworthy people, and if you did not like the food it was impossible to engage another cook for an hotel of which you were not the proprietor. Annually in the summer this sort of ladder of house-letting was set up in Tilling and was justly popular. But it all depended on a successful letting of Mallards, for if Elizabeth Mapp did not let Mallards, she would not take Diva's Wasters nor Diva Irene's Taormina.

Diva and Irene therefore hurried to the garden-room where they would hear their fate; Irene forging on ahead with that long masculine stride that easily kept pace with Major Benjy's, the short-legged Diva with that twinkle of feet that was like the scadding of a thrush over the lawn.

"Well, Mapp, what luck?" asked Irene.

Miss Mapp waited till Diva had shot in.

"I think I shall tease you both," said she playfully with her widest smile.

"Oh, hurry up," said Irene. "I know perfectly well from your face that you've let it. Otherwise it would be all screwed up."

Miss Mapp, though there was no question about her being the social queen of Tilling, sometimes felt that there were ugly Bolshevistic symptoms in the air, when quaint Irene spoke to her like that. And Irene had a dreadful gift of mimicry, which was a very low weapon, but formidable. It was always wise to be polite to mimics.

"Patience, a little patience, dear," said Miss Mapp soothingly. "If you know I've let it, why wait?"

"Because I should like a cocktail," said Irene. "If you'll just send for one, you can go on teasing."

"Well, I've let it for August and September," said Miss Mapp, preferring to abandon her teasing than give Irene a cocktail. "And I'm lucky in my tenant. I never met a sweeter woman than dear Mrs. Lucas."

"Thank God," said Diva, drawing up her chair to the still uncleared table. "Give me a cup of tea, Elizabeth. I could eat nothing till I knew."

"How much did you stick her for it?" asked Irene.

"Beg your pardon, dear?" asked Miss Mapp, who could not be expected to understand such a vulgar expression.

"What price did you screw her up to? What's she got to pay you?" said Irene impatiently. "Damage: dibs."

"She instantly closed with the price I suggested," said Miss Mapp. "I'm not sure, quaint one, that anything beyond that is what might be called your business."

"I disagree about that," said the quaint one. "There ought to be a sliding-scale. If you've made her pay through the nose, Diva ought to make you pay through the nose for her house, and I ought to make her pay through the nose for mine. Equality, Fraternity, Notality."

Miss Mapp bubbled with disarming laughter and rang the bell for Irene's cocktail, which might stop her pursuing this subject, for the sliding-scale of twelve, eight and five guineas a week had been the basis of previous calculations. Yet if Lucia so willingly consented to pay more, surely that was nobody's affair but that of the high contracting parties. Irene, soothed by the prospect of her cocktail, pursued the dangerous topic no further, but sat down at Miss Mapp's piano and picked out God Save the King, with one uncertain finger. Her cocktail arrived just as she finished it.

"Thank you, dear," said Miss Mapp. "Sweet music."

"Cheerio!" said Irene. "Are you charging Lucas anything extra for use of a fine old instrument?"

Miss Mapp was goaded into a direct and emphatic reply.

"No, darling, I am not," she said, "as you are so interested in matters that don't concern you."

"Well, well, no offence meant," said Irene. "Thanks for the cocktail. Look in to-morrow between twelve and one at my studio, if you want to see far the greater part of a well-made man. I'll be off now to cook my supper. Au reservoir."

Miss Mapp finished the few strawberries that Diva had spared and sighed.

"Our dear Irene has a very coarse side to her nature, Diva," she said. "No harm in her, but just common. Sad! Such a contrast to dear Mrs. Lucas. So refined: scraps of Italian beautifully pronounced. And so delighted with everything."

"Ought we to call on her?" asked Diva. "Widow's mourning, you know."

Miss Mapp considered this. One plan would be that she should take Lucia under her wing (provided she was willing to go there), another to let it be known in Tilling (if she wasn't) that she did not want to be called upon. That would set Tilling's back up, for if there was one thing it hated it was anything that (in spite of widows' weeds) might be interpreted into superiority. Though Lucia would only be two months in Tilling, Miss Mapp did not want her to be too popular on her own account, independently. She wanted . . . she wanted to have Lucia in her pocket, to take her by the hand and show her to Tilling, but to be in control. It all had to be thought out.

"I'll find out when she comes," she said. "I'll ask her, for indeed I feel quite an old friend already."

"And who's the man?" asked Diva.

"Dear Mr. Georgie Pillson. He entertained me so charmingly when I was at Riseholme for a night or two

some years ago. They are staying at the 'Trader's Arms,' and off again to-morrow."

"What? Staying there together?" asked Diva.

Miss Mapp turned her head slightly aside as if to avoid some faint unpleasant smell.

"Diva dear," she said. "Old friends as we are, I should be sorry to have a mind like yours. Horrid. You've been reading too many novels. If widows' weeds are not a sufficient protection against such innuendoes, a baby-girl in its christening robe wouldn't be safe."

"Gracious me, I made no innuendo," said the astonished Diva. "I only meant it was rather a daring thing to do. So it is. Anything more came from your mind, Elizabeth, not mine. I merely ask you not to put it on to me, and then say I'm horrid."

Miss Mapp smiled her widest.

"Of course I accept your apology, dear Diva," she said. "Fully, without back-thought of any kind."

"But I haven't apologized and I won't," cried Diva. "It's for you to do that."

To those not acquainted with the usage of the ladies of Tilling, such bitter plain-speaking might seem to denote a serious friction between old friends. But neither Elizabeth nor Diva had any such feeling: they would both have been highly surprised if an impartial listener had imagined anything so absurd. Such breezes, even if they grew far stronger than this, were no more than bracing airs that disposed to energy, or exercises to keep the mind fit. No malice.

"Another cup of tea, dear?" said Miss Mapp earnestly.

That was so like her, thought Diva: that was Elizabeth all over. When logic and good feeling alike had produced an irresistible case against her, she swept it all away, and asked you if you would have some more cold tea or cold mutton, or whatever it was.

Diva gave up. She knew she was no match for her and had more tea.



"About our own affairs then," she said, "if that's all settled——"

"Yes, dear: so sweetly so harmoniously," said Elizabeth.

Diva swallowed a regurgitation of resentment, and went on as if she had not been interrupted.

"—Mrs. Lucas takes possession on the first of August," she said. "That's to say, you would like to get into Wasters that day."

"Early that day, Diva, if you can manage it," said Elizabeth, "as I want to give my servants time to clean and tidy up. I would pop across in the morning, and my servants follow later. All so easy to manage."

"Then there's another thing," said Diva. "Garden-produce. You're leaving yours, I suppose."

Miss Mapp gave a little trill of laughter.

"I shan't be digging up all my potatoes and stripping the beans and the fruit-trees," she said. "And I thought—correct me if I am wrong—that my eight guineas a week for your little house included garden-produce, which is all that really concerns you and me. I think we agreed as to that."

Miss Mapp leant forward with an air of imparting luscious secret information, as that was settled.

"Diva: something thrilling," she said. "I happened to be glancing out of my window just by chance a few minutes before I waved to you, and there were Mrs. Lucas and Mr. Pillson peering, positively peering into the windows of Mallards Cottage. I couldn't help wondering if Mr. Pillson is thinking of taking it. They seemed to be so absorbed in it. It is to let, for Isabel Poppit has taken that little brown bungalow with no proper plumbing out by the golf-links."

"Thrilling!" said Diva. "There's a door in the paling between that little back-yard at Mallards Cottage and your garden. They could unlock it——"

She stopped, for this was a development of the trend of ideas for which neither of them had apologized.

"But even if Mr. Pillson is thinking of taking it, what next, Elizabeth?" she asked.

Miss Mapp bent to kiss the roses in that beautiful vase of flowers which she had cut this morning in preparation for Lucia's visit.

"Nothing particular, dear," she said. "Just one of my mad-cap notions. You and I might take Mallards Cottage between us, if it appealed to you. Sweet Isabel is only asking four guineas a week for it. If Mr. Pillson happens—it's only a speculation—to want it, we might ask, say, six. So cheap at six."

Diva rose.

"Shan't touch it," she said. "What if Mr. Pillson doesn't want it? A pure speculation."

"Perhaps it would be rather risky," said Miss Mapp. "And now I come to think of it, possibly, possibly rather stealing a march—don't they call it—on my friends."

"Oh, decidedly," said Diva. "No 'possibly possibly' about it."

Miss Mapp winced for a moment under this smart rap, and changed the subject.

"I shall have little more than a month, then, in my dear house," she said, "before I'm turned out of it. I must make the most of it, and have a quantity of little gaieties for you all."

Georgie and Lucia had another long stroll through the town after their dinner. The great celestial signs behaved admirably; it was as if the spirit of Tilling had arranged that sun, moon and stars alike should put forth their utmost arts of advertisement on its behalf, for scarcely had the fires of sunset ceased to blaze on its red walls and roofs and to incarnadine the thin skeins of mist that hung over the marsh, than a large punctual moon arose in the east and executed the most wonderful nocturnes in black and silver.

They found a great grey Norman tower keeping watch

seaward, an Edwardian gate with drum towers looking out landward: they found a belvedere platform built out on a steep slope to the east of the town, and the odour of the flowering hawthorns that grew there was wafted to them as they gazed at a lighthouse winking in the distance. In another street there stood Elizabethan cottages of brick and timber, very picturesque, but of no interest to those who were at home in Riseholme. Then there were human interests as well: quaint Irene was sitting, while the sunset flamed, on a camp-stool in the middle of a street, hatless and trousered, painting a most remarkable picture, apparently of the Day of Judgment, for the whole world was enveloped in fire. Just as they passed her her easel fell down, and in a loud angry voice she said, "Damn the beastly thing." Then they saw Diva scuttling along the High Street carrying a bird-cage. She called up to an open window very lamentably, "Oh, Dr. Dobbie, please! My canary's had a fit!" From another window, also open and unblinded, positively inviting scrutiny, there came a baritone voice singing "Will ye no' come back again?" and there, sure enough, was the Padre from Birmingham, with the little grey mouse tinkling on the piano. They could not tear themselves away (indeed there was quite a lot of people listening) till the song was over, and then they stole up the street, at the head of which stood Mallards, and from the house just below it came a muffled cry of "Quai-hai," and Lucia's lips formed the syllables "Major Benjy. At his diaries." They tiptoed on past Mallards itself, for the garden-room window was open wide, and so past Mallards Cottage, till they were out of sight.

"Georgie, entrancing," said Lucia. "They're all being themselves, and all so human and busy——"

"If I don't get Mallards Cottage," said Georgie, "I shall die."

"But you must. You shall. Now it's time to go to bed, though I could wander about for ever. We must

be up early in order to get to the house-agent's as soon as it's open. Woggles and Pickstick, isn't it?"

"Now you've confused me," said Georgie. "Rather like it, but not quite."

They went upstairs to bed: their rooms were next each other, with a communicating door. There was a bolt on Georgie's side of it, and he went swiftly across to this and fastened it. Even as he did so, he heard a key quietly turned from the other side of it. He undressed with the stealth of a burglar prowling about a house, for somehow it was shy work that he and Lucia should be going to bed so close to each other; he brushed his teeth with infinite precaution and bent low over the basin to eject (spitting would be too noisy a word) the water with which he had rinsed his mouth, for it would never do to let a sound of these intimate manœuvres penetrate next door. When half-undressed he remembered that the house-agents' name was Woolgar and Pipstow, and he longed to tap at Lucia's door and proclaim it, but the silence of the grave reigned next door, and perhaps Lucia was asleep already. Or was she, too, being as stealthy as he? Whichever it was (particularly if it was the last) he must not let a betrayal of his presence reach her.

He got into bed and clicked out his light. That could be done quite boldly: she might hear that, for it only betokened that all was over. Then, in spite of this long day in the open air, which should have conduced to drowsiness, he felt terribly wide-awake, for the subject which had intermittently occupied his mind, shadowing it with dim apprehension, ever since Pepino's death, presented itself in the most garish colours. For years, by a pretty Riseholme fantasy, it had always been supposed that he was the implacably Platonic but devout lover of Lucia: somehow that interesting fiction had grown up, and Lucia had certainly abetted it as well as himself. She had let it be supposed that he was, and that she accepted this chaste fervour. But now that

her year of widowhood was nearly over, there loomed in front of Georgie the awful fact that very soon there could be no earthly reason why he should not claim his reward for these years of devotion and exchange his passionate celibacy for an even more passionate matrimony. It was an unnerving thought that he might have the right before the summer was over, to tap at some door of communication like that which he had so carefully bolted (and she locked) and say, "May I come in, darling?" He felt that the words would freeze on his tongue before he could utter them.

Did Lucia expect him to ask to marry her? There was the crux and his imagination proceeded to crucify him upon it. They had posed for years as cherishing for each other a stainless devotion, but what if, with her, it had been no pose at all, but a dreadful reality? Had he been encouraging her to hope, by coming down to stay at this hotel in this very compromising manner? In his ghastly midnight musing, it seemed terribly likely. He had been very rash to come, and all this afternoon he had been pursuing his foolhardy career. He had said that life wasn't worth living if he could not get hold of Mallards Cottage, which was less than a stone's throw (even he could throw a stone as far as that) from the house she was to inhabit alone. Really it looked as if it was the proximity to her that made the Cottage so desirable. If she only knew how embarrassing her proximity had been just now when he prepared himself for bed! . . .

And Lucia always got what she wanted. There was a force about her he supposed (so different from poor Daisy's violent yappings and scufflings), which caused things to happen in the way she wished. He had fallen in with all her plans with a zest which it was only reasonable she should interpret favourably: only an hour or two ago he had solemnly affirmed that he must take Mallards Cottage, and the thing already was as good as done, for they were to breakfast to-morrow morning at

eight, in order to be at the house-agent's (Woggle and Pipsqueak, was it? He had forgotten again), as soon as it opened. Things happened like that for her: she got what she wanted. "But never, never," thought Georgie, "shall she get me. I couldn't possibly marry her, and I won't. I want to live quietly and do my sewing and my sketching, and see lots of Lucia, and play any amount of duets with her, but not marry her. Pray God, she doesn't want me to!"

Lucia was lying awake, too, next door, and if either of them could have known what the other was thinking about, they would both instantly have fallen into a refreshing sleep, instead of tossing and turning as they were doing. She, too, knew that for years she and Georgie had let it be taken for granted that they were mutually devoted, and had both about equally encouraged that impression. There had been an interlude, it is true, when that wonderful Olga Braceley had shone (like evening stars singing) over Riseholme, but she was to be absent from England for a year; besides she was married, and even if she had not been would certainly not have married Georgie. "So we needn't consider Olga," thought Lucia. "It's all about Georgie and me. Dear Georgie: he was so terribly glad when I began to be myself again, and how he jumped at the plan of coming to Tilling and spending the night here! And how he froze on to the idea of taking Mallards Cottage as soon as he knew I had got Mallards! I'm afraid I've been encouraging him to hope. He knows that my year of widowhood is almost over, and on the very eve of its accomplishment, I take him off on this solitary expedition with me. Dear me: it looks as if I was positively asking for it. How perfectly horrible!"

Though it was quite dark, Lucia felt herself blushing.

"What on earth am I to do?" continued these disconcerting reflections. "If he asks me to marry him, I must certainly refuse, for I couldn't do so: quite im-

possible. And then when I say no, he has every right to turn on me, and say I've been leading him on. I've been taking moonlight walks with him, I'm at this moment staying alone with him in an hotel. Oh dear! Oh dear!"

Lucia sat up in bed and listened. She longed to hear sounds of snoring from the next room, for that would show that the thought of the fulfilment of his long devotion was not keeping him awake, but there was no sound of any kind.

"I must do something about it to-morrow," she said to herself, "for if I allow things to go on like this, these two months here with him will be one series of agitating apprehensions. I must make it quite clear that I won't before he asks me. I can't bear to think of hurting Georgie, but it will hurt him less if I show him beforehand he's got no chance. Something about the beauty of a friendship untroubled with passion. Something about the tranquillity that comes with age. . . . There's that eternal old church clock striking three. Surely it must be fast."

Lucia lay down again: at last she was getting sleepy.

"Mallards," she said to herself. "Quaint Irene . . . Woffles and. . . . Georgie will know. Certainly Tilling is fascinating . . . Intriguing, too . . . characters of strong individuality to be dealt with. . . . A great variety, but I think I can manage them . . . And what about Miss Mapp? . . . Those wide grins. . . . We shall see about that. . . ."

Lucia awoke herself from a doze by giving a loud snore, and for one agonized moment thought it was Georgie, whom she had hoped to hear snoring, in alarming proximity to herself. That nightmare-spasm was quickly over, and she recognized that it was she that had done it. After all her trouble in not letting a sound of any sort penetrate through that door!

Georgie heard it. He was getting sleepy, too, in

spite of his uneasy musings, but he was just wide-awake enough to realize where that noise had come from.

“And if she snores as well . . .” he thought, and dozed off.