## V

LUCIA was writing letters in the window of the garden-room next morning. One, already finished, was to Adele Brixton asking her to send to Mallards the Queen Elizabeth costume for the tableaux: a second, also finished, was to the Padre, saying that she found she would not have time to attend committees for the hospital fête, and begging him to co-opt Miss Mapp. She would, however, do all in her power to help the scheme, and make any little suggestions that occurred to her. She added that the chance of getting fruit gratis for the refreshment department would be far brighter if the owner of it was on the board.

The third letter, firmly beginning "Dearest Liblib" (and to be signed very large, LUCIA), asking her to dine in two days' time, was not quite done when she saw dearest Liblib, with a fixed and awful smile, coming swiftly up the street. Lucia, sitting sideways to the window, could easily appear absorbed in her letter and unconscious of Elizabeth's approach, but from beneath half-lowered eyelids she watched her with the intensest interest. She was slanting across the street now, making a bee-line for the door of Mallards ("and if she tries to get in without ringing the bell, she'll find the chain on the door," thought Lucia).

The abandoned woman, disdaining the bell, turned the handle and pushed. It did not yield to her intrusion, and she pushed more strongly. There was the sound of jingling metal, audible even in the garden-room, as the hasp that held the end of the chain gave way; the door flew open wide, and with a few swift and nimble steps she just saved herself from falling flat on the floor of the hall.

Lucia, pale with fury, laid down her pen and waited for the situation to develop. She hoped she would behave like a lady, but was quite sure it would be a firm sort of lady. Presently up the steps to the garden-room came that fairy tread, the door was opened an inch, and that odious voice said:

"May I come in, dear?"

"Certainly," said Lucia brightly.

"Lulu dear," said Elizabeth, tripping across the room with little brisk steps. "First I must apologize: so humbly. Such a stupid accident. I tried to open your front door, and gave it a teeny little push and your servants had forgotten to take the chain down. I am afraid I broke something. The hasp must have been rusty."

Lucia looked puzzled.

"But didn't Grosvenor come to open the door when you rang?" she asked.

"That was just what I forgot to do, dear," said Elizabeth. "I thought I would pop in to see you without troubling Grosvenor. You and I such friends, and so difficult to remember that my dear little Mallards—— Several things to talk about!"

Lucia got up.

"Let us first see what damage you have done," she said with an icy calmness, and marched straight out of the room, followed by Elizabeth. The sound of the explosion had brought Grosvenor out of the dining-room, and Lucia picked up the dangling hasp and examined it.

"No, no sign of rust," she said. "Grosvenor, you must go down to the ironmonger and get them to come up and repair this at once. The chain must be made safer and you must remember always to put it on, day and night. If I am out, I will ring."

"So awfully sorry, dear Lulu," said Elizabeth, slightly cowed by this firm treatment. "I had no idea the chain could be up. We all keep our doors on the latch in Tilling. Quite a habit."

"I always used to in Riseholme," said Lucia. "Let us go back to the garden-room, and you will tell me what you came to talk about."

"Several things," said Elizabeth when they had settled themselves. "First, I am starting a little jumble-sale for the hospital, and I wanted to look out some old curtains and rugs, laid away in cupboards, to give to it. May I just go upstairs and downstairs and poke about to find them?"

"By all means," said Lucia. "Grosvenor shall go round with you as soon as she has come back from the ironmonger's."

"Thank you, dear," said Elizabeth, "though there's no need to trouble Grosvenor. Then another thing. I persuaded Mr. Georgie to send me a sketch for our picky exhibition. Promise me that you'll send me one too. Wouldn't be complete without something by you. How you get all you do into the day is beyond me; your sweet music, your sketching, and your dinner-parties every evening."

Lucia readily promised, and Elizabeth then appeared to lose herself in reverie.

"There *is* one more thing," she said at last. "I have heard a little gossip in the town both to-day and yesterday about a fête which it is proposed to give in my garden. I feel sure it is mere tittle-tattle, but I thought it would be better to come up here to know from you that there is no foundation for it."

"But I hope there is a great deal," said Lucia. "Some tableaux, some singing, in order to raise funds for the hospital. It would be so kind of you if you would supply the fruit for the refreshment booth from your garden. Apropos I should be so pleased to buy some of it every day myself. It would be fresher than if, as at present, it is taken down to the greengrocer and brought up again."

"Anything to oblige you, dear Lulu," said Elizabeth. "But that would be difficult to arrange. I have con-

tracted to send all my garden-produce to Twistevant's—such a quaint name, is it not?—for these months, and for the same reason I should be unable to supply this fête which I have heard spoken of. The fruit is no longer mine."

Lucia had already made up her mind that, after this affair of the chain, nothing would induce her to propose that Elizabeth should take her place on the committee. She would cling to it through storm and tempest.

"I see," she said. "Perhaps then you could let us have some fruit from Diva's garden, unless you have sold that also."

Elizabeth came to the point, disregarding so futile a suggestion.

"The fête itself, dear one," she said, "is what I must speak about. I cannot possibly permit it to take place in my garden. The rag-tag and bob-tail of Tilling passing through my hall and my sweet little sitting-room and spending the afternoon in my garden! All my carpets soiled and my flower-beds trampled on! And how do I know that they will not steal upstairs and filch what they can find?"

Lucia's blood had begun to boil: nobody could say that she was preserving a benevolent neutrality. In consequence she presented an icy demeanour, and if her voice trembled at all, it was from excessive cold.

"There will be no admission to the rooms in the house," she said. "I will lock all the doors, and I am sure that nobody in Tilling will be so ill bred as to attempt to force them open."

That was a nasty one. Elizabeth recoiled for a moment from the shock, but rallied. She opened her mouth very wide to begin again, but Lucia got in first.

"They will pass straight from the front door into the garden," she said, "where we undertake to entertain them, presenting their tickets of admission or paying at the door. As for the carpet in your sweet little sitting-room, there isn't one. And I have too high an opinion of the

manners of Tilling in general to suppose that they will trample on your flower-beds."

"Perhaps you would like to hire a menagerie," said Elizabeth, completely losing her self-control, "and have an exhibition of tigers and sharks in the garden-room."

"No: I should particularly dislike it," said Lucia earnestly. "Half of the garden-room would have to be turned into a sea-water tank for the sharks and my piano would be flooded. And the rest would have to be full of horse-flesh for the tigers. A most ridiculous proposal, and I cannot entertain it."

Elizabeth gave a dreadful gasp as if she was one of the sharks and the water had been forgotten. She adroitly changed the subject.

"Then again, there's the rumour—of course it's only rumour—that there is some idea of entertaining such inmates of the workhouse as are not bedridden. Impossible."

"I fancy the Padre is arranging that," said Lucia. "For my part, I'm delighted to give them a little treat."

"And for my part," said Miss Mapp, rising (she had become Miss Mapp again in Lucia's mind), "I will not have my little home-sanctuary invaded by the rag-tag——"

"The tickets will be half a crown," interposed Lucia.

"—and bob-tail of Tilling," continued Miss Mapp.

"As long as I am tenant here," said Lucia, "I shall ask here whom I please, and when I please, and—and how I please. Or do you wish me to send you a list of the friends I ask to dinner for your sanction?"

Miss Mapp, trembling very much, forced her lips to form the syllables:

"But, dear Lulu——"

"Dear Elizabeth, I must beg you not to call me Lulu," she said. "Such a detestable abbreviation——"

Grosvenor had appeared at the door of the garden-room.

"Yes, Grosvenor, what is it?" asked Lucia in precisely the same voice.

"The ironmonger is here, ma'am," she said, "and he says that he'll have to put in some rather large screws, as they're pulled out——"

"Whatever is necessary to make the door safe," said Lucia. "And Miss Mapp wants to look into cupboards and take some things of her own away. Go with her, please, and give her every facility."

Lucia, quite in the grand style, turned to look out of the window in the direction of Mallards Cottage, in order to give Miss Mapp the opportunity of a discreet exit. She threw the window open.

"Georgino! Georgino!" she called, and Georgie's face appeared above the paling.

"Come round and have 'ickle talk, Georgie," she said. "Sumfin I want to tell you. Presto!"

She kissed her hand to Georgie and turned back into the room. Miss Mapp was still there, but now invisible to Lucia's eye. She hummed a gay bar of Mozartino, and went back to her table in the bow-window where she tore up the letter of resignation and recommendation she had written to the Padre, and the half-finished note to Miss Mapp, which so cordially asked her to dinner, saying that it was so long since they had met, for they had met again now. When she looked up she was alone, and there was Georgie tripping up the steps by the front door. Though it was standing open (for the ironmonger was already engaged on the firm restoration of the chain) he very properly rang the bell and was admitted.

"There you are," said Lucia brightly as he came in. "Another lovely day."

"Perfect. What has happened to your front door?"

Lucia laughed.

"Elizabeth came to see me," she said gaily. "The chain was on the door, as I have ordered it always shall be. But she gave the door such a biff that the hasp pulled out. It's being repaired."

"No!" said Georgie, "and did you give her what for?"

"She had several things she wanted to see me about," said Lucia, keeping an intermittent eye on the front door. "She wanted to get out of her cupboards some stuff for the jumble-sale she is getting up in aid of the hospital, and she is at it now under Grosvenor's superintendence. Then she wanted me to send a sketch for the picture exhibition, I said I would be delighted. Then she said she could not manage to send any fruit for our fête here. She did not approve of the fête at all, Georgie. In fact, she forbade me to give it. We had a little chat about that."

"But what's to be done then?" asked Georgie.

"Nothing that I know of, except to give the fête," said Lucia. "But it would be no use asking her to be on the committee for an object of which she disapproved, so I tore up the letter I had written to the Padre about it."

Lucia suddenly focused her eyes and her attention on the front door, and a tone of warm human interest melted the deadly chill of her voice.

"Georgie, there she goes," she said. "What a quantity of things! There's an old kettle and a boot-jack, and a rug with a hole in it, and one stair-rod. And there's a shaving from the front door where they are putting in bigger screws, stuck to her skirt. . . . And she's dropped the stair-rod. . . . Major Benjy's picking it up for her."

Georgie hurried to the window to see these exciting happenings, but Miss Mapp, having recovered the stair-rod, was already disappearing.

"I wish I hadn't given her my picture of the Land-gate," said he. "It was one of my best. But aren't you going to tell me all about your interview? Properly, I mean: everything."

"Not worth speaking of," said Lucia. "She asked me if I would like to have a menagerie and keep tigers and sharks in the garden-room. That sort of thing. Mere raving. Come out, Georgie. I want to do a little

shopping. Coplen told me there were some excellent greengages from the garden which he was taking down to Twistevant's."

It was the hour when the collective social life of Tilling was at its briskest. The events of the evening before, tea-parties, and games of bridge had become known and were under discussion, as the ladies of the place with their baskets on their arms collided with each other as they popped in and out of shops and obstructed the pavements. Many parcels were being left at Wasters which Miss Mapp now occupied, for jumble-sales on behalf of deserving objects were justly popular, since everybody had a lot of junk in their houses, which they could not bear to throw away, but for which they had no earthly use. Diva had already been back from Taormina to her own house (as Elizabeth to hers) and had disinterred from a cupboard of rubbish a pair of tongs, the claws of which twisted round if you tried to pick up a lump of coal and dropped it on the carpet, but which were otherwise perfect. Then there was a scuttle which had a hole in the bottom, through which coal dust softly dribbled, and a candlestick which had lost one of its feet, and a glass inkstand once handsome, but now cracked. These treasures, handsome donations to a jumble-sale, but otherwise of no particular value, she carried to her own hall, where donors were requested to leave their offerings, and she learned from Withers, Miss Mapp's parlour-maid, the disagreeable news that the jumble-sale was to be held here. The thought revolted her; all the rag-tag and bob-tail of Tilling would come wandering about her house, soiling her carpets and smudging her walls. At this moment Miss Mapp herself came in carrying the tea-kettle and the boot-jack and the other things. She had already thought of half a dozen withering retorts she might have made to Lucia.

"Elizabeth, this will never do," said Diva. "I can't have the jumble-sale held here. They'll make a dreadful mess of the place."

"Oh no, dear," said Miss Mapp, with searing memories of a recent interview in her mind. "The people will only come into your hall where you see there's no carpet, and make their purchases. What a beautiful pair of tongs! For my sale? Fancy! Thank you, dear Diva."

"But I forbid the jumble-sale to be held here," said Diva. "You'll be wanting to have a menagerie here next."

This was amazing luck.

"No, dear, I couldn't dream of it," said Miss Mapp. "I should hate to have tigers and sharks all over the place. Ridiculous!"

"I shall put up a merry-go-round in quaint Irene's studio at Taormina," said Diva.

"I doubt if there's room, dear," said Miss Mapp, scoring heavily again, "but you might measure. Perfectly legitimate, of course, for if my house may be given over to parties for paupers, you can surely have a merry-go-round in quaint Irene's and I a jumble-sale in yours."

"It's not the same thing," said Diva. "Providing beautiful tableaux in your garden is quite different from using my panelled hall to sell kettles and coal-scuttles with holes in them."

"I dare say I could find a good many holes in the tableaux," said Miss Mapp.

Diva could think of no adequate verbal retort to such coruscations, so for answer she merely picked up the tongs, the coal-scuttle, the candlestick and the inkstand, and put them back in the cupboard from which she had just taken them, and left her tenant to sparkle by herself.

Most of the damaged objects for the jumble-sale must have arrived by now, and after arranging them in tasteful groups Miss Mapp sat down in a rickety basket-chair presented by the Padre for fell meditation. Certainly it was not pretty of Diva (no one could say that Diva was pretty) to have withdrawn her treasures, but that was not worth thinking about. What did demand her highest mental activities was Lucia's conduct. How grievously

different she had turned out to be from that sweet woman for whom she had originally felt so warm an affection, whom she had planned to take so cosily under her wing, and administer in small doses as treats to Tilling society! Lucia had turned upon her and positively bitten the caressing hand. By means of showy little dinners and odious flatteries, she had quite certainly made Major Benjy and the Padre and the Wyses and poor Diva think that she was a very remarkable and delightful person and in these manœuvres Miss Mapp saw a shocking and sinister attempt to set herself up as the Queen of Tilling society. Lucia had given dinner-parties on three consecutive nights since her return, she had put herself on the committee for this fête, which (however much Miss Mapp might say she could not possibly permit it) she had not the slightest idea how to stop, and though Lucia was only a temporary resident here, these weeks would be quite intolerable if she continued to inflate herself in this presumptuous manner. It was certainly time for Miss Mapp to reassert herself before this rebel made more progress, and though dinner-giving was unusual in Tilling, she determined to give one or two most amusing ones herself, to none of which, of course, she would invite Lucia. But that was not nearly enough: she must administer some frightful snub (or snubs) to the woman. Georgie was in the same boat and must suffer too, for Lucia would not like that. So she sat in this web of crippled fire-irons and napless rugs like a spider, meditating reprisals. Perhaps it was a pity, when she needed allies, to have quarrelled with Diva, but a dinner would set that right. Before long she got up with a pleased expression. "That will do to begin with: he won't like that at all," she said to herself and went out to do her belated marketing.

She passed Lucia and Georgie, but decided not to see them, and, energetically waving her hand to Mrs. Bartlett, she popped into Twistevant's, from the door of which they had just come out. At that moment quaint Irene,

after a few words with the Padre, caught sight of Lucia, and hurried across the street to her. She was hatless, as usual, and wore a collarless shirt and knickerbockers unlike any other lady of Tilling, but as she approached Lucia her face assumed an acid and awful smile, just like somebody else's, and then she spoke in a cooing velvety voice that was quite unmistakable.

"The boy stood on the burning deck, Lulu," she said. "Whence all but he had fled, dear. The flames that lit the battle-wreck, sweet one, shone round him——"

Quaint Irene broke off suddenly, for within a yard of her at the door of Twistevant's appeared Miss Mapp. She looked clean over all their heads, and darted across the street to Wasters, carrying a small straw basket of her own delicious greengages.

"Oh, lor!" said Irene. "The Mapp's in the fire, so that's done. Yes. I'll recite for you at your fête. Georgie, what a saucy hat! I was just going to Taormina to rout out some old sketches of mine for the Art Show, and then this happens. I wouldn't have had it not happen for a hundred pounds."

"Come and dine to-night," said Lucia warmly, breaking all records in the way of hospitality.

"Yes, if I needn't dress, and you'll send me home afterwards. I'm half a mile out of the town and I may be tipsy, for Major Benjy says you've got jolly good booze, quai hai, the King, God bless him! Good-bye."

"Most original!" said Lucia. "To go on with what I was telling you, Georgie, Liblib said she would not have her little home-sanctuary—Good morning, Padre. Miss Mapp shoved her way into Mallards this morning without ringing, and broke the chain which was on the door, such a hurry was she in to tell me that she will not have her little home-sanctuary, as I was just saying to Georgie, invaded by the rag-tag and bob-tail of Tilling."

"Hoots awa!" said the Padre. "What in the world has Mistress Mapp got to do with it? An' who's holding

a jumble-sale in Mistress Plaistow's? I keeked in just now wi' my bit o' rubbish and never did I see such a mess. Na, na! Fair play's a jool, an' we'll go richt ahead. Excuse me, there's wee wifie wanting me."

"It's war," said Georgie as the Padre darted across to the Mouse, who was on the other side of the street, to tell her what had happened.

"No, I'm just defending myself," said Lucia. "It's right that people should know she burst my door-chain."

"Well, I feel like the fourth of August, 1914," said Georgie. "What do you suppose she'll do next?"

"You may depend upon it, Georgie, that I shall be ready for her whatever it is," said Lucia. "I shan't raise a finger against her, if she behaves. But she *shall* ring the bell and I *won't* be dictated to and I *won't* be called Lulu. However, there's no immediate danger of that. Come, Georgie, let us go home and finish our sketches. Then we'll have them framed and send them Liblib for the picture exhibition. Perhaps that will convince her of my general good will, which I assure you is quite sincere."

The jumble-sale opened next day, and Georgie, having taken his picture of Lucia's house and her picture of his to be framed in a very handsome manner, went on to Wasters with the idea of buying anything that could be of the smallest use for any purpose, and thus showing more good will towards the patroness. Miss Mapp was darting to and fro with lures for purchasers, holding the kettle away from the light so that the hole in its bottom should not be noticed, and she gave him a smile that looked rather like a snarl, but after all very like the smile she had for others. Georgie selected a hearth-brush, some curtain rings and a kettle-holder.

Then in a dark corner he came across a large cardboard tray, holding miscellaneous objects with the label "All 6*d*. Each." There were thimbles, there were photographs with slightly damaged frames, there were chipped china ornaments and cork-screws, and there was the picture

of the Land-gate which he had painted himself and given Miss Mapp. Withers, Miss Mapp's parlour-maid, was at a desk for the exchange of custom by the door, and he exhibited his purchases for her inspection.

"Ninepence for the hearth-brush and threepence for the curtain rings," said Georgie in a trembling voice, "and sixpence for the kettle-holder. Then there's this little picture out of the sixpenny tray, which makes just two shillings."

Laden with these miscellaneous purchases he went swiftly up the street to Mallards. Lucia was at the window of the garden-room, and her gimlet-eye saw that something had happened. She threw the sash up.

"I'm afraid the chain is on the door, Georgie," she called out. "You'll have to ring. What is it?"

"I'll show you," said Georgie.

He deposited the hearth-brush, the curtain rings and the kettle-holder in the hall, and hurried out to the garden-room with the picture.

"The sketch I gave her," he said. "In the sixpenny tray. Why, the frame cost a shilling."

Lucia's face became a flint.

"I never heard of such a thing, Georgie," said she. "The monstrous woman!"

"It may have got there by mistake," said Georgie, frightened at this Medusa countenance.

"Rubbish, Georgie," said Lucia.

Pictures for the annual exhibition of the Art Society of which Miss Mapp was President had been arriving in considerable numbers at Wasters, and stood stacked round the walls of the hall where the jumble-sale had been held a few days before, awaiting the judgment of the hanging committee which consisted of the President, the Treasurer and the Secretary: the two latter were Mr. and Mrs. Wyse. Miss Mapp had sent in half a dozen water-colours, the Treasurer a study in still life of a tea-

cup, an orange and a wallflower, the Secretary a pastel portrait of the King of Italy, whom she had seen at a distance in Rome last spring. She had reinforced the vivid impression he had made on her by photographs. All these, following the precedent of the pictures of Royal Academicians at Burlington House, would be hung on the line without dispute, and there could not be any friction concerning them. But quaint Irene had sent some at which Miss Mapp felt lines must be drawn. They were, as usual, very strange and modern: there was one, harmless but insane, that purported to be Tilling Church by moonlight: a bright green pinnacle all crooked (she supposed it was a pinnacle) rose up against a strip of purple sky and the whole of the rest of the canvas was black. There was the back of somebody with no clothes on lying on an emerald-green sofa: and, worst of all, there was a picture called "Women Wrestlers," from which Miss Mapp hurriedly averted her eyes. A proper regard for decency alone, even if Irene had not mimicked her reciting "The Boy stood on the burning deck," would have made her resolve to oppose, tooth and nail, the exhibition of these shameless athletes. Unfortunately Mr. Wyse had the most unbounded admiration for quaint Irene's work, and if she had sent in a picture of mixed wrestlers he would probably have said, "Dear me, very powerful!" He was a hard man to resist, for if he and Miss Mapp had a very strong difference of opinion concerning any particular canvas he broke off and fell into fresh transports of admiration at her own pictures and this rather disarmed opposition.

The meeting of the hanging committee was to take place this morning at noon. Half an hour before that time, an errand boy arrived at Wasters from the frame-maker's bringing, according to the order he had received, two parcels which contained Georgie's picture of Mallards and Lucia's picture of Mallards Cottage: they had the cards of their perpetrators attached. "Rubbishy little daubs," thought Miss Mapp to herself, "but I suppose those two

Wyses will insist." Then an imprudent demon of revenge suddenly took complete possession of her, and she called back the boy, and said she had a further errand for him.

At a quarter before twelve the boy arrived at Mallards and rang the bell. Grosvenor took down the chain and received from him a thin square parcel labelled "With care." One minute afterwards he delivered a similar parcel to Foljambe at Mallards Cottage, and had discharged Miss Mapp's further errand. The two maids conveyed these to their employers, and Georgie and Lucia, tearing off the wrappers, found themselves simultaneously confronted with their own pictures. A typewritten slip accompanied each, conveying to them the cordial thanks of the hanging committee and its regrets that the limited wall space at its disposal would not permit of these works of art being exhibited.

Georgie ran out into his little yard and looked over the paling of Lucia's garden. At the same moment Lucia threw open the window of the garden-room which faced towards the paling.

"Georgie, have you received——" she called.

"Yes," said Georgie.

"So have I."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

Lucia's face assumed an expression eager and pensive, the far-away look with which she listened to Beethoven. She thought intently for a moment.

"I shall take a season ticket for the exhibition," she said, "and constantly——"

"I can't quite hear you," said Georgie.

Lucia raised her voice.

"I shall buy a season ticket for the exhibition," she shouted, "and go there every day. Believe me, that's the only way to take it. They don't want our pictures, but we musn't be small about it. Dignity, Georgie."

There was nothing to add to so sublime a declaration, and Lucia went across to the bow-window, looking down the street. At that moment the Wyses' Royce lurched

out of Porpoise Street, and turned down towards the High Street. Lucia knew they were both on the hanging committee which had just rejected one of her own most successful sketches (for the crooked chimney had turned out beautifully), but she felt not the smallest resentment towards them. No doubt they had acted quite conscientiously and she waved her hand in answer to a flutter of sables from the interior of the car. Presently she went down herself to the High Street to hear the news of the morning, and there was the Wyses' car drawn up in front of Wasters. She remembered then that the hanging committee met this morning, and a suspicion, too awful to be credible, flashed through her mind. But she thrust it out, as being unworthy of entertainment by a clean mind. She did her shopping and on her return took down a pale straw-coloured sketch by Miss Mapp that hung in the garden-room, and put in its place her picture of Mallards Cottage and the crooked chimney. Then she called to mind that powerful platitude, and said to herself that time would show. . . .

Miss Mapp had not intended to be present at the desecration of her garden by paupers from the workhouse and such low haunts. She had consulted her solicitor, about her power to stop the entertainment, but he assured her that there was no known statute in English law, which enabled her to prevent her tenant giving a party. So she determined, in the manner of Lucia and the Elizabethan fête at Riseholme, to be unaware of it, not to know that any fête was contemplated, and never afterwards to ask a single question about it. But as the day approached she suspected that the hot tide of curiosity, rapidly rising in her, would probably end by swamping and submerging her principles. She had seen the Padre dressed in a long black cloak, and carrying an axe of enormous size, entering Mallards ; she had seen Diva come out in a white satin gown and scuttle down the street to Taormina, and

those two prodigies taken together suggested that the execution of Mary Queen of Scots was in hand. (Diva as the Queen!) She had seen boards and posts carried in by the garden-door and quantities of red cloth, so there was perhaps to be a stage for these tableaux. More intriguing yet was the apparition of Major Benjy carrying a cardboard crown glittering with gold paper. What on earth did that portend? Then there was her fruit to give an eye to: those choir-boys, scampering all over the garden in the intervals between their glees would probably pick every pear from the tree. She starved to know what was going on, but since she avoided all mention of the fête herself, others were most amazingly respectful to her reticence. She knew nothing, she could only make these delirious guesses, and there was *that* Lucia, being the centre of executioners and queens and choir-boys, instead of in her proper place, made much of by kind Miss Mapp, and enjoying such glimpses of Tilling society as she chose to give her. "A fortnight ago," thought kind Miss Mapp, "I was popping in and out of the house, and she was Lulu. Anyhow, that was a nasty one she got over her picture, and I must bear her no grudge. I shall go to the fête because I can't help it, and I shall be very cordial to her and admire her tableaux. We're all Christians together, and I despise smallness."

It was distressing to be asked to pay half a crown for admittance to her own Mallards, but there seemed positively no other way to get past Grosvenor. Very distressing, too, it was to see Lucia in full fig as Queen Elizabeth, graciously receiving new-comers on the edge of the lawn, precisely as if this was her party and these people who had paid half a crown to come in, her invited guests. It was a bitter thought that it ought to be herself who (though not dressed in all that flummery, so unconvincing by daylight) welcomed the crowd; for to whom, pray, did Mallards belong, and who had allowed it (since she could not stop it) to be thrown open? At the bottom of the steps into the garden-room was a

large placard "Private," but of course that would not apply to her. Through the half-opened door, as she passed, she caught a glimpse of a familiar figure, though sadly travestied, sitting in a robe and a golden crown and pouring something into a glass: no doubt then the garden-room was the green-room of performers in the tableaux, who, less greedy of publicity than Lulu, hid themselves here till the time of their exposure brought them out. She would go in there presently, but her immediate duty, bitter but necessary, was to greet her hostess. With a very happy inspiration she tripped up to Lucia and dropped a low curtsey.

"Your Majesty's most obedient humble servant," she said, and then trusting that Lucia had seen that this obeisance was made in a mocking spirit, abounded in geniality.

"My dear, what a love of a costume!" she said. "And what a lovely day for your fête! And what a crowd! How the half-crowns have been pouring in! All Tilling seems to be here, and I'm sure I don't wonder."

Lucia rivalled these cordialities with equal fervour and about as much sincerity.

"Elizabeth! How nice of you to look in!" she said. "Ecco, le due Elizabethe! And you like my frock? Sweet of you! Yes. Tilling has indeed come to the aid of the Hospital! And your jumble-sale too was a wonderful success, was it not? Nothing left, I am told."

Miss Mapp had a moment's hesitation as to whether she should not continue to stand by Lucia and shake hands with new arrivals and give them a word of welcome, but she decided she could do more effective work if she made herself independent and played hostess by herself. Also this mention of the jumble sale made her slightly uneasy. Withers had told her that Georgie had bought his own picture of the Land-gate from the sixpenny tray, and Lucia (for all her cordiality) might be about to spring some horrid trap on her about it.

"Yes, indeed," she said. "My little sale-room was

soon as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. But I mustn't monopolize you, dear, or I shall be lynched. There's a whole *queue* of people waiting to get a word with you. How I shall enjoy the tableaux! Looking forward to them so!"

She sidled off into the crowd. There were those dreadful old wretches from the workhouse, snuffy old things, some of them smoking pipes on her lawn and scattering matches, and being served with tea by Irene and the Padre's curate.

"So pleased to see you all here," she said, "sitting in my garden and enjoying your tea. I must pick a nice nosegay for you to take back home. How de do, Mr. Sturgis. Delighted you could come and help to entertain the old folks for us. Good afternoon, Mr. Wyse; yes, my little garden is looking nice, isn't it? Susan, dear! Have you noticed my bed of delphiniums? I must give you some seed. Oh, there is the town-crier ringing his bell! I suppose that means we must take our places for the tableaux. What a good stage! I hope the posts will not have made very big holes in my lawn. Oh, one of those naughty choir-boys is hovering about my fig-tree. I cannot allow that."

She hurried off to stop any possibility of such depredation, and had made some telling allusions to the eighth commandment when on a second peal of the town-crier's bell, the procession of mummers came down the steps of the garden-room and advancing across the lawn disappeared behind the stage. Poor Major Benjy (so weak of him to allow himself to be dragged into this sort of thing) looked a perfect guy in his crown (who could he be meant for?) and as for Diva—— Then there was Georgie (Drake indeed!), and last of all Queen Elizabeth with her train held up by two choir-boys. Poor Lucia! Not content with a week of mumming at Riseholme she had to go on with her processions and dressings-up here. Some people lived on limelight.

Miss Mapp could not bring herself to take a seat close

to the stage, and be seen applauding—there seemed to be some hitch with the curtain : no, it righted itself, what a pity !—and she hung about on the outskirts of the audience. Glees were interposed between the tableaux ; how thin were the voices of those little boys out of doors ! Then Irene, dressed like a sailor, recited that ludicrous parody. Roars of laughter. Then Major Benjy was King Cophetua : that was why he had a crown. Oh dear, oh dear ! It was sad to reflect that an elderly, sensible man (for when at his best, he was that) could be got hold of by a pushing woman. The final tableau, of course (anyone might have guessed that), was the knighting of Drake by Queen Elizabeth. Then amid sycophantic applause the procession of guys returned and went back into the garden-room. Mr. and Mrs. Wyse followed them, and it seemed pretty clear that they were going to have a private tea there. Doubtless she would be soon sought for among the crowd with a message from Lucia to hope that she would join them in her own garden-room, but as nothing of the sort came, she presently thought that it would be only kind to Lucia to do so, and add her voice to the general chorus of congratulation that was no doubt going on. So with a brisk little tap on the door, and the inquiry " May I come in ? " she entered.

There they all were, as pleased as children with dressing-up. King Cophetua still wore his crown, tilted slightly to one side like a forage cap, and he and Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary were seated round the tea-table and calling each other your Majesty. King Cophetua had a large whisky and soda in front of him and Miss Mapp felt quite certain it was not his first. But though sick in soul at these puerilities she pulled herself together and made a beautiful curtsey to the silly creatures. And the worst of it was that there was no one left of her own intimate circle to whom she could in private express her disdain, for they were all in it, either actively or, like the Wyses, truckling to Lucia.

Lucia for the moment seemed rather surprised to see

her, but she welcomed her and poured her out a cup of rather tepid tea, nasty to the taste. She must truckle, too, to the whole lot of them, though that tasted nastier than the tea.

"How I congratulate you all," she cried. "Padre, you looked too cruel as executioner, your mouth so fixed and stern. It was quite a relief when the curtain came down. Irene, quaint one, how you made them laugh! Diva, Mr. Georgie, and above all our wonderful Queen Lucia. What a treat it has all been! The choir! Those beautiful glees. A thousand pities, Mr. Wyse, that the Contessa was not here."

There was still Susan to whom she ought to say something pleasant, but positively she could not go on, until she had eaten something solid. But Lucia chimed in.

"And your garden, Elizabeth," she said. "How they are enjoying it. I believe if the truth was known they are all glad that our little tableaux are over, so that they can wander about and admire the flowers. I must give a little party some night soon with Chinese lanterns and fairy-lights in the beds."

"Upon my word, your Majesty is spoiling us all," said Major Benjy. "Tilling's never had a month with so much pleasure provided for it. Glorious."

Miss Mapp had resolved to stop here if it was anyhow possible, till these sycophants had dispersed, and then have one private word with Lucia to indicate how ready she was to overlook all the little frictions that had undoubtedly arisen. She fully meant, without eating a morsel of humble pie herself, to allow Lucia to eat proud pie, for she saw that just for the present she herself was nowhere and Lucia everywhere. So Lucia should glut herself into a sense of complete superiority, and then it would be time to begin fresh manœuvres. Major Benjy and Diva soon took themselves off: she saw them from the garden-window going very slowly down the street, ever so pleased to have people staring at them, and Irene,

at the Padre's request, went out to dance a hornpipe on the lawn in her sailor clothes. But the two Wyses (always famous for sticking) remained and Georgie.

Mr. Wyse got up from the tea-table and passed round behind Miss Mapp's chair. Out of the corner of her eye she could see he was looking at the wall where a straw-coloured picture of her own hung. He always used to admire it, and it was pleasant to feel that he was giving it so careful and so respectful a scrutiny. Then he spoke to Lucia.

"How well I remember seeing you painting that," he said, "and how long I took to forgive myself for having disturbed you in my blundering car. A perfect little masterpiece, Mallards Cottage and the crooked chimney. To the life."

Susan heaved herself up from the sofa and joined in the admiration.

"Perfectly delightful," she said. "The lights, the shadows. Beautiful! What a touch!"

Miss Mapp turned her head slowly as if she had a stiff neck, and verified her awful conjecture that it was no longer a picture of her own that hung there, but the very picture of Lucia's which had been rejected for the Art Exhibition. She felt as if no picture but a bomb hung there, which might explode at some chance word, and blow her into a thousand fragments. It was best to hurry from this perilous neighbourhood.

"Dear Lucia," she said, "I must be off. Just one little stroll, if I may, round my garden, before I go home. My roses will never forgive me, if I go away without noticing them."

She was too late.

"How I wish I had known it was finished!" said Mr. Wyse. "I should have begged you to allow us to have it for our Art Exhibition. It would have been the gem of it. Cruel of you, Mrs. Lucas!"

"But I sent it in to the hanging committee," said Lucia. "Georgie sent his, too, of Mallards. They were both sent back to us."

Mr. Wyse turned from the picture to Lucia with an expression of incredulous horror, and Miss Mapp quietly turned to stone.

"But impossible," he said. "I am on the hanging committee myself, and I hope you cannot think I should have been such an imbecile. Susan is on the committee too: so is Miss Mapp. In fact, we are the hanging committee. Susan, that gem, that little masterpiece never came before us."

"Never," said Susan. "Never. Never, never."

Mr. Wyse's eye transferred itself to Miss Mapp. She was still stone and her face was as white as the wall of Mallards Cottage in the masterpiece. Then for the first time in the collective memory of Tilling Mr. Wyse allowed himself to use slang.

"There has been some hanky-panky," he said. "That picture never came before the hanging committee."

The stone image could just move its eyes and they looked, in a glassy manner, at Lucia. Lucia's met them with one short gimlet thrust, and she whisked round to Georgie. Her face was turned away from the others, and she gave him a prodigious wink, as he sat there palpitating with excitement.

"Georgino mio," she said. "Let us recall exactly what happened. The morning, I mean, when the hanging committee met. Let me see: let me see. Don't interrupt me: I will get it all clear."

Lucia pressed her hands to her forehead.

"I have it," she said. "It is perfectly vivid to me now. You had taken our little pictures down to the framer's, Georgie, and told him to send them in to Elizabeth's house direct. That was it. The errand boy from the framer's came up here that very morning, and delivered mine to Grosvenor, and yours to Foljambe. Let me think exactly when that was. What time was it, Mr. Wyse, that the hanging committee met?"

"At twelve, precisely," said Mr. Wyse.

"That fits in perfectly," said Lucia. "I called to

Georgie out of the window here, and we told each other that our pictures had been rejected. A moment later, I saw your car go down to the High Street and when I went down there soon afterwards, it was standing in front of Miss—I mean Elizabeth's house. Clearly what happened was that the framer misunderstood Georgie's instructions, and returned the pictures to us before the hanging committee sat at all. So you never saw them, and we imagined all the time—did we not, Georgie?—that you had simply sent them back."

"But what must you have thought of us?" said Mr. Wyse, with a gesture of despair.

"Why, that you did not conscientiously think very much of our art," said Lucia. "We were perfectly satisfied with your decision. I felt sure that my little picture had a hundred faults and feeblenesses."

Miss Mapp had become unpetrified. Could it be that by some miraculous oversight she had not put into those parcels the formal, typewritten rejection of the committee? It did not seem likely, for she had a very vivid remembrance of the gratification it gave her to do so, but the only alternative theory was to suppose a magnanimity on Lucia's part which seemed even more miraculous. She burst into speech.

"How we all congratulate ourselves," she cried, "that it has all been cleared up! Such a stupid errand-boy! What are we to do next, Mr. Wyse? Our exhibition must secure Lucia's sweet picture, and of course Mr. Pillson's too. But how are we to find room for them? Everything is hung."

"Nothing easier," said Mr. Wyse. "I shall instantly withdraw my paltry little piece of still life, and I am sure that Susan——"

"No, that would never do," said Miss Mapp, currying favour all round. "That beautiful wallflower, I could almost smell it: that King of Italy. Mine shall go: two or three of mine. I insist on it."

Mr. Wyse bowed to Lucia and then to Georgie.

"I have a plan better yet," he said. "Let us put—if we may have the privilege of securing what was so nearly lost to our exhibition—let us put these two pictures on easels as showing how deeply we appreciate our good fortune in getting them."

He bowed to his wife, he bowed—was it quite a bow? —to Miss Mapp, and had there been a mirror, he would no doubt have bowed to himself.

"Besides," he said, "our little sketches will not thus suffer so much from their proximity to——" and he bowed to Lucia. "And if Mr. Pillson will similarly allow us——" he bowed to Georgie.

Georgie, following Lucia's lead, graciously offered to go round to the Cottage and bring back his picture of Mallards, but Mr. Wyse would not hear of such a thing. He and Susan would go off in the Royce now, with Lucia's masterpiece, and fetch Georgie's from Mallards Cottage, and the sun should not set before they both stood on their distinguished easels in the enriched exhibition. So off they went in a great hurry to procure the easels before the sun went down and Miss Mapp, unable alone to face the reinstated victims of her fraud, scurried after them in a tumult of mixed emotions. Outside in the garden Irene, dancing hornpipes, was surrounded by both sexes of the enraptured youth of Tilling, for the boys knew she was a girl, and the girls thought she looked so like a boy. She shouted out "Come and dance, Mapp," and Elizabeth fled from her own sweet garden as if it had been a plague-stricken area, and never spoke to her roses at all.

The Queen and Drake were left alone in the garden-room.

"Well, I never!" said Georgie. "Did you? She sent them back all by herself."

"I'm not the least surprised," said Lucia. "It's like her."

"But why did you let her off?" he asked. "You ought to have exposed her and have done with her."

Lucia showed a momentary exultation, and executed a few steps from a Morris-dance.

"No, Georgie, that would have been a mistake," she said. "She knows that we know, and I can't wish her worse than that. And I rather think, though he makes me giddy with so much bowing, that Mr. Wyse has guessed. He certainly suspects something of the sort."

"Yes, he said there had been some hanky-panky," said Georgie. "That was a strong thing for him to say. All the same——"

Lucia shook her head.

"No, I'm right," she said. "Don't you see I've taken the moral stuffing out of that woman far more completely than if I had exposed her?"

"But she's a cheat," cried Georgie. "She's a liar, for she sent back our pictures with a formal notice that the committee had rejected them. She hasn't got any moral stuffing to take out."

Lucia pondered this.

"That's true, there doesn't seem to be much," she said. "But even then, think of the moral stuffing that I've put into myself. A far greater score, Georgie, than to have exposed her, and it must be quite agonizing for her to have that hanging over her head. Besides, she can't help being deeply grateful to me if there are any depths in that poor shallow nature. There may be: we must try to discover them. Take a broader view of it all, Georgie. . . . Oh, and I've thought of something fresh! Send round to Mr. Wyse for the exhibition your picture of the Land-gate, which poor Elizabeth sold. He will certainly hang it and she will see it there. That will round everything off nicely."

Lucia moved across to the piano and sat down on the treble music-stool.

"Let us forget all about these *piccoli disturbi*, Georgie," she said, "and have some music to put us in tune with beauty again. No, you needn't shut the door: it is so

hot, and I am sure that no one else will dream of passing that notice of ' Private,' or come in here unasked. Ickle bit of divine Mozartino ? "

Lucia found the duet at which she had worked quietly at odd moments.

" Let us try this," she said, " though it looks rather diffy. Oh, one thing more, Georgie. I think you and I had better keep those formal notices of rejection from the hanging committee just in case. We might need them some day, though I'm sure I hope we shan't. But one must be careful in dealing with that sort of woman. That's all I think. Now let us breathe harmony and loveliness again. Uno, due . . . pom."