VI

IT was a mellow morning of October, the season, as Lucia reflected, of mists and mellow fruitfulness, wonderful John Keats. There was no doubt about the mists, for there had been several sea-fogs in the English Channel, and the mellow fruitfulness of the garden at Mallards was equally indisputable. But now the fruitfulness of that sunny plot concerned Lucia far more than it had done during August and September, for she had taken Mallards for another month (Adele Brixton having taken the Hurst, Riseholme, for three), not on those original Shylock terms of fifteen guineas a week, and no garden-produce—but of twelve guineas a week, and all the garden-produce. It was a wonderful year for tomatoes: there were far more than a single widow could possibly eat, and Lucia, instead of selling them, constantly sent little presents of them to Georgie and Major Benjy. She had sent one basket of them to Miss Mapp, but these had been returned and Miss Mapp had written an effusive note saying that they would be wasted on her. Lucia had applauded that; it showed a very proper spirit.

The chain of consequences, therefore, of Lucia's remaining at Mallards was far-reaching. Miss Mapp took Wasters for another month at a slightly lower rent, Diva extended her lease of Taormina, and Irene still occupied the four-roomed labourer's cottage outside Tilling, which suited her so well, and the labourer and his family remained in the hop-picker's shanty. It was getting chilly of nights in the shanty, and he looked forward to the time when, Adele having left the Hurst, his cottage could be restored to him. Nor did the chain of conse-

quences end here, for Georgie could not go back to Riseholme without Foljambe, and Foljambe would not go back there and leave her Cadman, while Lucia remained at Mallards. So Isabel Poppit continued to inhabit her bungalow by the sea, and Georgie remained in Mallards Cottage. With her skin turned black with all those sun-baths, and her hair spiky and wiry with so many sea-baths, Isabel resembled a cross between a kipper and a sea-urchin.

September had been full of events. The Art Exhibition had been a great success, and quantities of the pictures had been sold. Lucia had bought Georgie's picture of Mallards, Georgie had bought Lucia's picture of Mallards Cottage, Mr. Wyse had bought his wife's pastel of the King of Italy, and sent it as a birthday present to Amelia, and Susan Wyse had bought her husband's tea-cup and wallflower and kept them herself. But the greatest gesture of all had been Lucia's purchase of one of Miss Mapp's six exhibits, and this had practically forced Miss Mapp, so powerful was the suggestion hidden in it, to buy George's picture of the Land-gate, which he had given her, and which she had sold (not even for her own benefit but for that of the Hospital) for sixpence at her jumble-sale. She had had to pay a guinea to regain what had once been hers, so that in the end the revengeful impulse which had prompted her to put it in the sixpenny-tray had been cruelly expensive. But she had still felt herself to be under Lucia's thumb in the whole matter of the exhibition (as indeed she was) and this purchase was of the nature of a propitiatory act. They had met one morning at the show, and Lucia had looked long at this sketch of Georgie's and then, looking long at Elizabeth, she had said it was one of the most charming and exquisite of his water-colours. Inwardly raging, yet somehow impotent to resist, Elizabeth had forked up. But she was now busily persuading herself that this purchase had something to do with the Hospital, and that she need not

make any further contributions to its funds this year: she felt there was a very good chance of persuading herself about this. No one had bought quaint Irene's pictures, and she had turned the women wrestlers into men.

Since then Miss Mapp had been very busy with the conversion of the marvellous crop of apples, plums and red currants in Diva's garden into jam and jelly. Her cook could not tackle so big a job alone, and she herself spent hours a day in the kitchen, and the most delicious odours of boiling preserves were wafted out of the windows into the High Street. It could not be supposed that they would escape Diva's sharp nose, and there had been words about it. But garden-produce (Miss Mapp believed) meant what it said, or would dear Diva prefer that she let the crop rot on the trees, and be a portion for wasps. Diva acknowledged that she would. And when the fruit was finished Miss Mapp proposed to turn her attention to the vegetable marrows, which, with a little ginger, made a very useful preserve for the household. She would leave a dozen of these pots for Diva.

But the jam-making was over now and Miss Mapp was glad of that, for she had scalded her thumb: quite a blister. She was even gladder that the Art Exhibition was over. All the important works of the Tilling school (except the pastel of the King of Italy) remained in Tilling, she had made her propitiatory sacrifice about Georgie's sketch of the Land-gate, and she had no reason to suppose that Lucia had ever repented of that moment of superb magnanimity in the garden-room, which had averted an exposure of which she still occasionally trembled to think. Lucia could not go back on that now, it was all over and done with like the jam-making (though, like the jam-making, it had left a certain seared and sensitive place behind) and having held her tongue then, Lucia could not blab afterwards. Like the banns in church, she must for ever hold her peace. Miss Mapp had been deeply grateful for that clemency at the time, but no one could go on being grateful indefinitely. You

were grateful until you had paid your debt of gratitude, and then you were free. She would certainly be grateful again, when this month was over and Lucia and Georgie left Tilling, never, she hoped, to return, but for the last week or two she had felt that she had discharged in full every groat of gratitude she owed Lucia, and her mind had been busier than usual over plots and plans and libels and inductions with regard to her tenant who, with those cheeseparing ways so justly abhorred by Miss Mapp, had knocked down the rent to twelve guineas a week and grabbed the tomatoes.

But Miss Mapp did not yet despair of dealing Lucia some nasty blow, for the fact of the matter was (she felt sure of it) that Tilling generally was growing a little restive under Lucia's autocratic ways. She had been taking them in hand, she had been patronizing them, which Tilling never could stand, she had been giving them treats, just like that! She had sent out cards for an evening party (not dinner at all) with "un po' di musica" written in the left-hand corner. Even Mr. Wyse, that notorious sycophant, had raised his eyebrows over this, and had allowed that this was rather an unusual inscription: "musica" (he thought) would have been more ordinary, and he would ask Amelia when she came. That had confirmed a secret suspicion which Miss Mapp had long entertained that Lucia's Italian (and, of course, Georgie's too) was really confined to such words as "ecco" and "bon giorno," and "bello," and she was earnestly hoping that Amelia would come before October was over, and they would all see what these great talks in Italian to which Mr. Wyse was so looking forward, would amount to.

And what an evening that "po-di-mu" (as it was already referred to with faint little smiles) had been! It was a wet night and in obedience to her command (for at that time Lucia was at the height of the ascendancy she had acquired at the Hospital fête), they had all put mackintoshes over their evening clothes, and goloshes

over their evening shoes, and slopped up to Mallards through the pouring rain. A couple of journeys of Lucia's car could have brought them all in comfort and dryness, but she had not offered so obvious a convenience. Mrs. Wyse's Royce was being overhauled, so they had to walk too, and a bedraggled and discontented company had assembled. They had gone into the garden-room dripped on by the wistaria, and an interminable po-di-mu ensued. Lucia turned off all the lights in the room except one on the piano, so that they saw her profile against a black background, like the head on a postage stamp, and first she played the slow movement out of the Moonlight Sonata. She stopped once, just after she had begun, because Diva coughed, and when she had finished there was a long silence. Lucia sighed and Georgie sighed, and everyone said " Thank you " simultaneously. Major Benjy said he was devoted to Chopin and Lucia playfully told him that she would take his musical education in hand.

Then she had allowed the lights to be turned up again, and there was a few minutes' pause to enable them to conquer the poignancy of emotion aroused by that exquisite rendering of the Moonlight Sonata, to disinfect it so to speak with cigarettes, or drown it, as Major Benjy did, in rapid whiskies and sodas, and when they felt braver the po-di-mu began again, with a duet, between her and Georgie, of innumerable movements by Mozart, who must indeed have been a most prolific composer if he wrote all that. Diva fell quietly asleep, and presently there were indications that she would soon be noisily asleep. Miss Mapp hoped that she would begin to snore properly, for that would be a good set down for Lucia, but Major Benjy poked her stealthily on the knee to rouse her. Mr. Wyse began to stifle yawns, though he sat as upright as ever, with his eyes fixed rather glassily on the ceiling, and ejaculated " Charming " at the end of every movement. When it was all over there were some faintly murmured requests that Lucia

would play to them again, and without any further pressing, she sat down. Her obtuseness was really astounding.

"How you all work me!" she said. "A fugue by Bach then, if you insist on it, and if Georgie will promise not to scold me if I break down."

Luckily amid suppressed sighs of relief, she did break down, and though she was still perfectly willing to try again, there was a general chorus of unwillingness to take advantage of her great good nature, and after a wretched supper, consisting largely of tomato-salad, they trooped out into the rain, cheered by the promise of another musical evening next week when she would have that beautiful fugue by heart.

It was not the next week but the same week that they had all been bidden to a further evening of harmony, and symptoms of revolt, skilfully fomented by Miss Mapp, were observable. She had just received her note of invitation one morning, when Diva trundled in to Wasters.

"Another po-di-mu already," said she sarcastically. "What are you——"

"Isn't it unfortunate?" interrupted Elizabeth, "for I hope, dear Diva, you have not forgotten that you promised to come in that very night—Thursday, isn't it—and play piquet with me."

Diva returned Elizabeth's elaborate wink. "So I did," she said. "Anyhow, I do."

"Consequently we shall have to refuse dear Lucia's invitation," said Elizabeth regretfully. "Lovely, wasn't it, the other night? And so many movements of Mozart. I began to think he must have discovered the secret of perpetual motion, and that we should be stuck there till Doomsday."

Diva was fidgeting about the room in her restless manner ("Rather like a spinning top," thought Miss Mapp, "bumping into everything. I wish it would die").

"I don't think she plays bridge very well," said Diva.

"She began, you know, by saying she was so anxious to learn, and that we all played marvellously, but now she lays down the law like anything, telling us what we ought to have declared, and how we ought to have played. It's quite like——"

She was going to say "It's quite like playing with you," but luckily stopped in time.

"I haven't had the privilege of playing with her. Evidently I'm not up to her form," said Elizabeth, "but I hear, only report, mind, that she doesn't know the elements of the game."

"Well, not much more," said Diva. "And she says she will start a bridge class if we like."

"She spoils us! And who will the pupils be?" asked Elizabeth.

"I know one who won't," said Diva darkly.

"And one and one make two," observed Elizabeth. "A pity that she sets herself up like that. Saying the other night that she would take Major Benjy's musical education in hand! I always thought education began at home, and I'm sure I never heard so many wrong notes in my life."

Diva ruminated a moment, and began spinning again. "She offered to take the choir practices in church, only the Padre wouldn't hear of it," she said. "And there's talk of a class to read Homer in Pope's translation."

"She has every accomplishment," said Elizabeth, "including push."

Diva bumped into another topic.

"I met Mr. Wyse just now," she said. "Countess Amelia Faraglione is coming to-morrow."

Miss Mapp sprang up.

"Not really?" she cried. "Why, she'll be here for Lucia's po-di-mu on Thursday. And the Wyses will be going, that's certain, and they are sure to ask if they may bring the Faradidleone with them. Diva, dear, we must have our piquet another night. I wouldn't miss that for anything."

"Why?" asked Diva.

"Just think what will happen! She'll be forced to talk Italian, for Mr. Wyse has often said what a treat it will be to hear them talk it together, and I'm sure Lucia doesn't know any. I must be there."

"But if she does know it, it will be rather a sell," said Diva. "We shall have gone there for nothing except to hear all that Mozart over again and to eat tomatoes. I had heart-burn half the night afterwards."

"Trust me, Diva," said Elizabeth. "I swear she doesn't know any Italian. And how on earth will she be able to wriggle out of talking it? With all her ingeniousness, it can't be done. She can't help being exposed."

"Well, that would be rather amusing," said Diva. "Being put down a peg or two certainly wouldn't hurt her. All right. I'll say I'll come."

Miss Mapp's policy was now of course the exact reverse of what she had first planned. Instead of scheming to get all Tilling to refuse Lucia's invitation to listen to another po-di-mu, her object was to encourage everyone to go, in order that they might listen not so much to Mozart as to her rich silences or faltering replies when challenged to converse in the Italian language. She found that the Padre and Mrs. Bartlett had hurriedly arranged a choir practice and a meeting of the girl-guides respectively to take place at the unusual hour of half-past nine in the evening in order to be able to decline the po-di-mu, but Elizabeth, throwing economy to the winds, asked them both to dine with her on the fatal night, and come on to Lucia's delicious music afterwards. This added inducement prevailed, and off they scurried to tell choir-boys and girl-guides that the meetings were cancelled and would be held at the usual hour the day after. The curate needed no persuasion, for he thought that Lucia had a wonderful touch on the piano, and was already looking forward to more; Irene similarly had developed a violent *schwärm* for Lucia and had accepted, so that Tilling, thanks to Elizabeth's friendly

offices, would now muster in force to hear Lucia play duets and fugues and not speak Italian. And when, in casual conversation with Mr. Wyse, Elizabeth learned that he had (as she had anticipated) ventured to ask Lucia if she would excuse the presumption of one of her greatest admirers, and bring his sister Amelia to her *soirée* and that Lucia had sent him her most cordial permission to do so, it seemed that nothing could stand in the way of the fulfilment of Elizabeth's romantic revenge on that upstart visitor for presuming to set herself up as Queen of the social life of Tilling.

It was, as need hardly be explained, this aspect of the affair which so strongly appealed to the sporting instincts of the place. Miss Mapp had long been considered by others as well as herself the first social citizen of Tilling, and though she had often been obliged to fight desperately for her position, and had suffered from time to time manifold reverses, she had managed to maintain it, because there was no one else of so commanding and unscrupulous a character. Then, this alien from Riseholme had appeared and had not so much challenged her as just taken her sceptre and her crown and worn them now for a couple of months. At present all attempts to recapture them had failed, but Lucia had grown a little arrogant, she had offered to take choir practice, she had issued her invitations (so thought Tilling) rather as if they had been commands, and Tilling would not have been sorry to see her suffer some set-back. Nobody wanted to turn out in the evening to hear her play Mozart (except the curate), no one intended to listen to her read Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, or to be instructed how to play bridge, and though Miss Mapp was no favourite, they would have liked to see her score. But there was little partisanship; it was the sporting instinct which looked forward to witnessing an engagement between two well-equipped Queens, and seeing whether one really could speak Italian or not, even if they had to listen to all the fugues of Bach first. Every-

one, finally, except Miss Mapp, wherever their private sympathies might lie, regretted that now in less than a month, Lucia would have gone back to her own kingdom of Riseholme, where it appeared she had no rival of any sort, for these encounters were highly stimulating to students of human nature and haters of Miss Mapp. Never before had Tilling known so exciting a season.

On this mellow morning, then, of October, Lucia, after practising her fugue for the coming po-di-mu, and observing Coplen bring into the house a wonderful supply of tomatoes, had received that appalling note from Mr. Wyse, conveyed by the Royce, asking if he might bring Contessa Amelia di Faraglione to the musical party to which he so much looked forward. The gravity of the issue was instantly clear to Lucia, for Mr. Wyse had made no secret about the pleasure it would give him to hear his sister and herself mellifluously converse in the Italian tongue, but without hesitation she sent back a note by the chauffeur and the Royce, that she would be charmed to see the Contessa. There was no getting out of that, and she must accept the inevitable before proceeding irresistibly to deal with it. From the window she observed the Royce backing and advancing and backing till it managed to turn and went round the corner to Porpoise Street.

Lucia closed the piano, for she had more cosmic concerns to think about than the fingerings of a fugue. Her party of course (that required no consideration) would have to be cancelled, but that was only one point in the problem that confronted her. For that baleful bilinguist the Contessa di Faraglione was not coming to Tilling (all the way from Italy) for one night but she was to stay here, so Mr. Wyse's note had mentioned, for "about a week," after which she would pay visits to her relations the Wyses of Whitchurch and others. So for a whole week (or about) Lucia would be in per-

petual danger of being called upon to talk Italian. Indeed, the danger was more than mere danger, for if anything in this world was certain, it was that Mr. Wyse would ask her to dinner during this week, and exposure would follow. Complete disappearance from Tilling during the Contessa's sojourn here was the only possible plan, yet how was that to be accomplished? Her house at Riseholme was let, but even if it had not been, she could not leave Tilling to-morrow, when she had invited everybody to a party in the evening.

The clock struck noon: she had meditated for a full half-hour, and now she rose.

"I can only think of influenza," she said to herself. "But I shall consult Georgie. A man might see it from another angle."

He came at once to her S.O.S.

"Georgino mio," began Lucia, but then suddenly corrected herself. "Georgie," she said. "Something very disagreeable. The Contessa Thingummy is coming to the Wyses to-morrow, and he's asked me if he may bring her to our musica. I had to say yes; no way out of it."

Georgie was often very perceptive. He saw what this meant at once.

"Good Lord," he said. "Can't you put it off? Sprain your thumb."

The man's angle was not being of much use so far.

"Not a bit of good," she said. "She'll be here about a week, and naturally I have to avoid meeting her altogether. The only thing I can think of is influenza."

Georgie never smoked in the morning, but the situation seemed to call for a cigarette.

"That would do it," he said. "Rather a bore for you, but you could live in the secret garden a good deal. It's not overlooked."

He stopped: the unusual tobacco had stimulated his perceptive powers.

"But what about me?" he said.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lucia.

"You're not looking far enough," said Georgie. "You're not taking the long view which you so often talk to me about. I can't have influenza too, it would be too suspicious. So I'm bound to meet the Faraglione and she'll see in a minute I can't talk Italian."

"Well?" said Lucia in a very selfish manner, as if he didn't matter at all.

"Oh, I'm not thinking about myself only," said Georgie in self-defence. "Not so at all. It'll react on you. You and I are supposed to talk Italian together, and when it's obvious I can't say more than three things in it, the fat's in the fire, however much influenza you have. How are you going to be supposed to jabber away in Italian to me when it's seen that I can't understand a word of it?"

Here indeed was the male angle, and an extremely awkward angle it was. For a moment Lucia covered her face with her hands.

"Georgie, what are we to do?" she asked in a stricken voice.

Georgie was a little ruffled at having been considered of such absolute unimportance until he pointed out to Lucia that her fate was involved with his, and it pleased him to echo her words.

"I'm sure I don't know," he said stiffly.

Lucia hastened to smooth his smart.

"My dear, I'm so glad I thought of consulting you," she said. "I knew it would take a man's mind to see all round the question, and how right you are! I never thought of that."

"Quite," said Georgie. "It's evident you haven't grasped the situation at all."

She paced up and down the garden-room in silence, recoiling once from the window, as she saw Elizabeth go by and kiss her hand with that awful hyæna grin of hers.

"Georgie, oo not cross with poor Lucia?" she said, resorting to the less dangerous lingo which they used in happier days. This softened Georgie.

"I was rather," said Georgie, "but never mind that now. What am I to do? Che faro, in fact."

Lucia shuddered.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't talk Italian," she said. "It's that we've got to avoid. It's odd that we have to break ourselves of the habit of doing something we can't do. . . . And you can't have influenza too. It would be too suspicious if you began simultaneously with me to-morrow. I've often wondered, now I come to think of it, if that woman, that Mapp, hasn't suspected that our Italian was a fake, and if we both had influenza exactly as the Faraglione arrived, she might easily put two and two together. Her mind is horrid enough for anything."

"I know she suspects," said Georgie. "She said some word in Italian to me the other day, which meant paper-knife, and she looked surprised when I didn't understand, and said it in English. Of course she had looked it out in a dictionary: it was a trap."

A flood of horrid light burst in on Lucia.

"Georgie," she cried. "She tried me with the same word. I've forgotten it again, but it did mean paper-knife. I didn't know it either, though I pretended it was her pronunciation that puzzled me. There's no end to her craftiness. But I'll get the better of her yet. I think you'll have to go away, while the Faraglione is here and I have influenza."

"But I don't want to go away," began Georgie. "Surely we can think of——"

Lucia paid no heed to this attempt at protest: it is doubtful if she even heard it, for the spark was lit now, and it went roaring through her fertile brain like a prairie fire in a high gale.

"You must go away to-morrow," she said. "Far better than influenza, and you must stop away till I send you a telegram, that the Faraglione has left. It will be very dull for me because I shall be entirely confined to the house and garden all the time you are gone. I

think the garden will be safe. I cannot remember that it is overlooked from any other house and I shall do a lot of reading, though even the piano won't be possible. . . . Georgie, I see it all. You have not been looking very well lately (my dear, you're the picture of health really, I have never seen you looking younger or better) and so you will have gone off to have a week at Folkestone or Littlestone, whichever you prefer. Sea air: you needn't bathe. And you can take my car, for I shan't be able to use it, and why not take Foljambe as well to valet you, as you often do when you go for a jaunt? She'll have her Cadman: we may as well make other people happy, Georgie, as it all seems to fit in so beautifully. And one thing more: this little jaunt of yours is entirely undertaken for my sake, and I must insist on paying it all. Go to a nice hotel and make yourself thoroughly comfortable; half a bottle of champagne whenever you want it in the evening, and what extras you like, and I will telephone to you to say when you can come back. You must start tomorrow morning before the Faraglione gets here."

Georgie knew it was useless to protest when Lucia got that loud, inspired, gabbling ring in her voice; she would cut through any opposition, as a steam saw buzzes through the most solid oak board till, amid a fountain of flying sawdust, it has sliced its way. He did not want to go away, but when Lucia exhibited that calibre of determination that he should, it was better to yield at once than to collapse later in a state of wretched exhaustion. Besides, there were bright points in her scheme. Foljambe would be delighted at the plan, for it would give her and Cadman leisure to enjoy each other's society; and it would not be disagreeable to stay for a week at some hotel in Folkestone and observe the cargoes of travellers from abroad arriving at the port after a billowy passage. Then he might find some bibelots in the shops, and he would listen to a municipal band, and have a bathroom next his bedroom, and do some sketches,

and sit in a lounge in a series of those suits which had so justly earned him the title of the best-dressed man in Tilling. He would have a fine Rolls-Royce in the hotel garage, and a smart chauffeur coming to ask for orders every morning, and he would be seen, an interesting and opulent figure, drinking his half-bottle of champagne every evening and he would possibly pick up an agreeable aquaintance or two. He had no hesitation whatever in accepting Lucia's proposal to stand the charges of this expedition, for, as she had most truly said, it was undertaken in her interests, and naturally she paid (besides, she was quite rich) for its equipment.

The main lines of this defensive campaign being thus laid down, Lucia, with her Napoleonic eye for detail, plunged into minor matters. She did not, of course, credit "that Mapp" with having procured the visit of the Faraglione, but a child could see that if she herself met the Faraglione during her stay here the grimmest exposure of her ignorance of the language she talked in such admired snippets must inevitably follow. "That Mapp" would pounce on this, and it was idle to deny that she would score heavily and horribly. But Georgie's absence (cheap at the cost) and her own invisibility by reason of influenza made a seemingly unassailable position and it was with a keen sense of exhilaration in the coming contest that she surveyed the arena.

Lucia sent for the trusty Grosvenor and confided in her sufficiently to make her a conspirator. She told her that she had a great mass of arrears to do in reading and writing, and that for the next week she intended to devote herself to them, and lead the life of a hermit. She wanted no callers, and did not mean to see anyone, and the easiest excuse was to say that she had influenza. No doubt there would be many inquiries, and so day by day she would issue to Grosvenor her own official bulletin. Then she told Cadman that Mr. Georgie was far from well, and she had bundled him off with the car to Folkestone for about a week: he and Foljambe

would accompany him. Then she made a careful survey of the house and garden to ascertain what freedom of movement she could have during her illness. Playing the piano, except very carefully with the soft pedal down, would be risky, but by a judicious adjustment of the curtains in the garden-room window, she could refresh herself with very satisfactory glances at the world outside. The garden, she was pleased to notice, was quite safe, thanks to its encompassing walls, from any prying eyes in the houses round: the top of the church tower alone overlooked it, and that might be disregarded, for only tourists ascended it.

Then forth she went for the usual shoppings and chats in the High Street and put in some further fine work. The morning tide was already on the ebb, but by swift flittings this way and that she managed to have a word with most of those who were coming to her po-di-mu to-morrow, and interlarded all she said to them with brilliant scraps of Italian. She just caught the Wyses as they were getting back into the Royce and said how molto amabile it was of them to give her the gran' piacere of seeing the Contessa next evening: indeed she would be a welcome guest, and it would be another gran' piacere to talk la bella lingua again. Georgie, alas, would not be there for he was un po' ammalato, and was going to spend a settimana by the mare per stabilirsi. Never had she been so fluent and idiomatic, and she accepted with mille grazie Susan's invitation to dine the evening after her music and renew the conversations to which she so much looked forward. She got almost tipsy with Italian. . . . Then she flew across the street to tell the curate that she was going to shut herself up all afternoon in order to get the Bach fugue more worthy of his critical ear, she told Diva to come early to her party in order that they might have a little chat first, and she just managed by a flute-like 'Cooee' to arrest Elizabeth as she was on the very doorstep of Wasters. With glee she learned that Elizabeth

was entertaining the Padre and his wife and Major Benjy to dinner before she brought them on to her party, and then, remembering the trap which that woman had laid for her and Georgie over the Italian paper-knife, she could not refrain from asking her to dine and play bridge on the third night of her coming illness. Of course she would be obliged to put her off, and that would be about square. . . . This half-hour's active work produced the impression that, however little pleasure Tilling anticipated from to-morrow's po-di-mu, the musician herself looked forward to it enormously, and was thirsting to talk Italian.

From the window of her bedroom next morning Lucia saw Georgie and Cadman and Foljambe set off for Folkestone, and it was with a Lucretian sense of pleasure in her own coming tranquillity that she contemplated the commotion and general upset of plans which was shortly to descend on Tilling. She went to the garden-room, adjusted the curtains and brewed the tempest which she now sent forth in the shape of a series of notes charged with the bitterest regrets. They were written in pencil (the consummate artist) as if from bed, and were traced in a feeble hand not like her usual firm script. "What a disappointment!" she wrote to Mrs. Wyse. "How cruel to have got the influenza—where could she have caught it?—on the very morning of her party, and what a blow not to be able to welcome the Contessa to-day or to dine with dear Susan to-morrow!" There was another note to Major Benjy, and others to Diva and quaint Irene and the curate and the Padre and Elizabeth. She still hoped that possibly she might be well enough for bridge and dinner the day after to-morrow, but Elizabeth must remember how infectious influenza was, and again she herself might not be well enough. That seemed pretty safe, for Elizabeth had a frantic phobia of infection, and Wasters had reeked of carbolic all the time the jumble-sale was being held, for fear of some bit of rubbish having come in contact with tainted hands.

Lucia gave these notes to Grosvenor for immediate delivery and told her that the bulletin for the day in answer to callers was that there was no anxiety, for the attack though sharp was not serious, and only demanded warmth and complete quiet. She then proceeded to get both by sitting in this warm October sun in her garden, reading Pope's translation of the *Iliad* and seeing what the Greek for it was.

Three impregnable days passed thus. From behind the adjusted curtains of the garden-room she observed the coming of many callers and Grosvenor's admirable demeanour to them. The Royce lurched up the street, and there was Susan in her sables, and, sitting next her, a vivacious gesticulating woman with a monocle, who looked the sort of person who could talk at the most appalling rate. This without doubt was the fatal Contessa, and Lucia felt that to see her thus was like observing a lion at large from behind the bars of a comfortable cage. Miss Mapp on the second day came twice, and each time she glanced piercingly at the curtains, as if she knew that trick, and listened as if hoping to hear the sound of the piano. The Padre sent a note almost entirely in Highland dialect, the curate turned away from the door with evident relief in his face at the news he had received, and whistled the Bach fugue rather out of tune.

On the fifth day of her illness new interests sprang up for Lucia that led her to neglect Pope's *Iliad* altogether. By the first post there came a letter from Georgie, containing an enclosure which Lucia saw (with a slight misgiving) was written in Italian. She turned first to Georgie's letter.

"The most wonderful thing has happened," wrote Georgie, "and you will be pleased. . . . There's a family here with whom I've made friends, an English father, an Italian mother and a girl with a pig-tail. Listen! The mother teaches the girl Italian, and sets

her little themes to write on some subject or other, and then corrects them and writes a fair copy. Well, I was sitting in the lounge this morning while the girl was having her lesson, and Mrs. Brocklebank (that's her name) asked me to suggest a subject for the theme, and I had the most marvellous idea. I said 'Let her write a letter to an Italian Countess whom she has never seen before, and say how she regretted having been obliged to put off her musical party to which she had asked the Countess and her brother because she had caught influenza. She was so sorry not to meet her, and she was afraid that as the Countess was only staying a week in the place, she would not have the pleasure of seeing her at all.' Mrs. B. thought that would do beautifully for a theme, and I repeated it over again to make sure. Then the girl wrote it, and Mrs. B. corrected it and made a fair copy. I begged her to give it me, because I adored Italian (though I couldn't speak it) and it was so beautifully expressed. I haven't told this very well, because I'm in a hurry to catch the post, but I enclose Mrs. B.'s Italian letter, and you just see whether it doesn't do the trick too marvellously. I'm having quite a gay time, music and drives and seeing the Channel boat come in, and aren't I clever?

"Your devoted,

"GEORGIE.

"Foljambe and Cadman have had a row, but I'm afraid they've made it up."

Lucia, with her misgivings turned to joyful expectation, seized and read the enclosure. Indeed it was a miraculous piece of manna to one whom the very sight of it made hungry. It might have been the result of telepathy between Mrs. Brocklebank and her own subconscious self, so aptly did that lady grasp her particular unspoken need. It expressed in the most elegant idiom precisely what met the situation, and she would copy out and send it to-day, without altering a single word.

And how clever of Georgie to have thought of it. He deserved all the champagne he could drink.

Lucia used her highest art in making a copy (on Mallards paper) of this document, as if writing hastily in a familiar medium. Occasionally she wrote a word (it did not matter what), erased it so as to render it illegible to the closest scrutiny, and then went on with Mrs. Brocklebank's manuscript; occasionally she omitted a word of it and then inserted it with suitable curves of direction above. No one receiving her transcript could imagine that it was other than her own extempore scribble. Mrs. Brocklebank had said that in two or three days she hoped to be able to see her friends again, and that fitted beautifully, because in two or three days now the Contessa's visit would have come to an end, and Lucia could get quite well at once.

The second post arrived before Lucia had finished this thoughtful copy. There was a letter in Lady Brixton's handwriting, and hastily scribbling the final florid salutations to the Contessa, she opened this, and thereupon forgot Georgie and Mrs. Brocklebank and everything else in the presence of the tremendous question which was brought for her decision. Adele had simply fallen in love with Riseholme; she affirmed that life was no longer worth living without a house there, and, of all houses, she would like best to purchase, unfurnished, the Hurst. Failing that there was another that would do, belonging to round red little Mrs. Quantock, who, she had ascertained, might consider selling it. Could darling Lucia therefore let her know with the shortest possible delay whether she would be prepared to sell the Hurst? If she had no thought of doing so Adele would begin tempting Mrs. Quantock at once. But if she had, let genteel indications about price be outlined at once.

There are certain processes of mental solidification which take place with extraordinary rapidity, because the system is already soaked and super-saturated with the issues involved. It was so now with Lucia. Instantly,

on the perusal of Adele's inquiries her own mind solidified. She had long been obliquely contemplating some such step as Adele's letter thrust in front of her, and she was surprised to find that her decision was already made. Riseholme, once so vivid and significant, had during these weeks at Tilling been fading like an ancient photograph exposed to the sun, and all its features, foregrounds and backgrounds had grown blurred and dim. If she went back to Riseholme at the end of the month, she would find there nothing to occupy her energies, or call out her unique powers of self-assertion. She had so swept the board with her management of the Elizabethan fête that no further progress was possible. Poor dear Daisy might occasionally make some minute mutinies, but after being Drake's wife (what a lesson for her!) there would be no real fighting spirit left in her. It was far better, while her own energies still bubbled within her, to conquer this fresh world of Tilling than to smoulder at Riseholme. Her work there was done, whereas here, as this week of influenza testified, there was a very great deal to do. Elizabeth Mapp was still in action and capable of delivering broadsides; innumerable crises might still arise, volcanoes smoked, thunder-clouds threatened, there were hostile and malignant forces to be thwarted. She had never been better occupied and diverted, the place suited her, and it bristled with opportunities. She wrote to Adele at once saying that dear as Riseholme (and especially the Hurst) was to her, she was prepared to be tempted, and indicated a sum before which she was likely to fall.

Miss Mapp by this fifth day of Lucia's illness was completely baffled. She did not yet allow herself to despair of becoming unbaffled, for she was certain that there was a mystery here, and every mystery had an explanation if you only worked at it enough. The coincidence of Lucia's illness with the arrival of the Contessa and Georgie's departure, supported by the trap

she had laid about the paper-knife, was far too glaring to be overlooked by any constructive mind, and there must be something behind it. Only a foolish ingenuous child (and Elizabeth was anything but that) could have considered these as isolated phenomena. With a faith that would have removed mountains, she believed that Lucia was perfectly well, but all she had been able to do at present was to recite her creed to Major Benjy and Diva and others, and eagerly wait for any shred of evidence to support it. Attempts to pump Grosvenor and lynx-like glances at the window of the garden-room had yielded nothing, and her anxious inquiry addressed to Dr. Dobbie, the leading physician of Tilling, had yielded a snub. She did not know who Lucia's doctor was, so with a view to ascertaining that, and possibly getting other information, she had approached him with her most winning smile, and asked how the dear patient at Mallards was.

"I am not attending any dear patient at Mallards," had been his unpromising reply, "and if I was I need hardly remind you that, as a professional man, I should not dream of answering any inquiry about my patients without their express permission to do so. Good morning."

"A very rude man," thought Miss Mapp, "but perhaps I had better not try to get at it that way."

She looked up at the church, wondering if she would find inspiration in that beautiful grey tower, which she had so often sketched, outlined against the pellucid blue of the October sky. She found it instantly, for she remembered that the leads at the top of it which commanded so broad a view of the surrounding country commanded also a perfectly wonderful view of her own little secret garden. It was a small chance, but no chance however small must be neglected in this famine of evidence, and it came to her in a flash that there could be no more pleasant way of spending the morning than making a sketch of the green, green marsh and the

line of the blue, blue sea beyond. She hurried back to Wasters, pausing only at Mallards to glance at the garden-room where the curtains were adjusted in the most exasperatingly skilful manner, and to receive Grosvenor's assurance that the patient's temperature was quite normal to-day.

"Oh, that is good news," said Miss Mapp. "Then to-morrow perhaps she will be about again."

"I couldn't say, miss," said Grosvenor, holding on to the door.

"Give her my fondest love," said Miss Mapp, "and tell her how rejoiced I am, please, Grosvenor."

"Yes, miss," said Grosvenor, and before Miss Mapp could step from the threshold, she heard the rattle of the chain behind the closed door.

She was going to lunch that day with the Wyses, a meal which Mr. Wyse, in his absurd affected fashion, always alluded to as breakfast, especially when the Contessa was staying with them. Breakfast was at one, but there was time for an hour at the top of the church-tower first. In order to see the features of the landscape better, she took up an opera-glass with her sketching things. She first put a blue watery wash on her block for the sky and sea, and a green one for the marsh, and while these were drying she examined every nook of her garden with the opera-glass. No luck, and she picked up her sketch again on which the sky was rapidly inundating the land.

Lucia had learned this morning *via* Grosvenor and her cook and Figgis, Mr. Wyse's butler, that the week of the Contessa's stay here was to be curtailed by one day and that the Royce would convey her to Whitchurch next morning on her visit to the younger but ennobled branch of the family. Further intelligence from the same source made known that the breakfast to-day to which Miss Mapp was bidden was a Belshazzar breakfast, eight if not ten. This was good news: the period of Lucia's danger of detection would be over in less than

twenty-four hours, and about the time that Miss Mapp at the top of the tower of Tilling Church was hastily separating the firmament from the dry land, Lucia wrote out a telegram to Georgie that he might return the following day and find all clear. Together with that she sent a request to Messrs. Woolgar and Pipstow that they should furnish her with an order to view a certain house she had seen just outside Tilling, near quaint Irene's cottage, which she had observed was for sale.

She hesitated about giving Grosvenor the envelope addressed to Contessa di Faraglione, which contained the transcript, duly signed, of Mrs. Brocklebank's letter to a Countess, and decided, on the score of dramatic fitness, to have it delivered shortly after one o'clock when Mrs. Wyse's breakfast would be in progress, with orders that it should be presented to the Contessa at once.

Lucia was feeling the want of vigorous exercise, and bethought herself of the Ideal System of Callisthenics for those no longer Young. For five days she had been confined to house and garden, and the craving to skip took possession of her. Skipping was an exercise highly recommended by the ideal system, and she told Grosvenor to bring back for her, with the order to view from Messrs. Woolgar and Pipstow, a simple skipping-rope from the toyshop in the High Street. While Grosvenor was gone this desire for free active moment in the open air awoke a kindred passion for the healthful action of the sun on the skin, and she hurried up to her sick-room, changed into a dazzling bathing-suit of black and yellow, and, putting on a very smart dressing-gown gay with ribands, was waiting in the garden-room when Grosvenor returned, recalling to her mind the jerks and swayings which had kept her in such excellent health when grief forbade her to play golf.

The hour was a quarter to one when Lucia tripped into the secret garden, shed her dressing-gown and began skipping on the little lawn with the utmost vigour. The sound of the church-clock immediately below Miss Mapp's

eyrie on the tower warned her that it was time to put her sketching-things away, deposit them at Wasters and go out to breakfast. During the last half-hour she had cast periodical but fruitless glances at her garden, and had really given it up as a bad job. Now she looked down once more, and there close beside the bust of good Queen Anne was a gay striped figure of waspish colours skipping away like mad. She dropped her sketch, she reached out a trembling hand for her opera-glasses, the focus of which was already adjusted to a nicety, and by their aid she saw that this athletic wasp who was skipping with such exuberant activity was none other than the invalid.

Miss Mapp gave a shrill crow of triumph. All came to him who waited, and if she had known Greek she would undoubtedly have exclaimed "Eureka": as it was she only crowed. It was all too good to be true, but it was all too distinct not to be. "Now I've got her," she thought. "The whole thing is as clear as daylight. I was right all the time. She has not had influenza any more than I, and I'll tell everybody at breakfast what I have seen." But the sight still fascinated her. What shameless vigour, when she should have been languid with fever! What abysses of falsehood, all because she could not talk Italian! What expense to herself in that unnecessary dinner to the Padre and Major Benjy! There was no end to it. . . .

Lucia stalked about the lawn with a high prancing motion when she had finished her skipping. Then she skipped again, and then she made some odd jerks, as if she was being electrocuted. She took long deep breaths, she lifted her arms high above her head as if to dive, she lay down on the grass and kicked, she walked on tiptoe like a ballerina, she swung her body round from the hips. All this had for Miss Mapp the fascination that flavours strong disgust and contempt. Eventually, just as the clock struck one, she wrapped herself in her dressing-gown, the best was clearly over. Miss Mapp was already late, and she must hurry straight from the tower to her

breakfast, for there was no time to go back to Wasters first. She would be profuse in pretty apologies for her lateness; the view from the church-tower had been so entrancing (this was perfectly true) that she had lost all count of time. She could not show her sketch to the general company, because the firmament had got dreadfully muddled up with the waters which were below it, but instead she would tell them something which would muddle up Lucia.

The breakfast-party was all assembled in Mrs. Wyse's drawing-room with its dark oak beams and its silver-framed photographs and its morocco-case containing the order of the M.B.E., still negligently open. Everybody had been waiting, everybody was rather grumpy at the delay, and on her entry the Contessa had clearly said "Ecco! Now at last!"

They would soon forgive her when they learned what had really made her late, but it was better to wait for a little before imparting her news, until breakfast had put them all in a more appreciative mood. She hastened on this desired moment by little compliments all round: what a wonderful sermon the Padre had preached last Sunday: how well dear Susan looked: what a delicious dish these eggs *à la Capri* were, she must really be greedy and take a teeny bit more. But these dewdrops were only interjected, for the Contessa talked in a loud continuous voice as usual, addressing the entire table, and speaking with equal fluency whether her mouth was full or empty.

At last the opportunity arrived. Figgis brought in a note on an immense silver (probably plated) salver, and presented it to the Contessa: it was to be delivered at once. Amelia said "Scusi" which everybody understood—even Lucia might have understood that—and was silent for a space as she tore it open and began reading it.

Miss Mapp decided to tantalize and excite them all before actually making her revelation.

"I will give anybody three guesses as to what I have

seen this morning," she said. "Mr. Wyse, Major Benjy, Padre, you must all guess. It is about someone whom we all know, who is still an invalid. I was sketching this morning at the top of the tower, and happened to glance down into my pet little secret garden. And there was Lucia in the middle of the lawn. How was she dressed, and what was she doing? Three guesses each, shall it be?"

Alas! The introductory tantalization had been too long, for before anybody could guess anything the Contessa broke in again.

"But never have I read such a letter!" she cried. "It is from Mrs. Lucas. All in Italian, and such Italian! Perfect. I should not have thought that any foreigner could have had such command of idiom and elegance. I have lived in Italy for ten years, but my Italian is a bungle compared to this. I have always said that no foreigner ever can learn Italian perfectly, and Cecco too, but we were wrong. This Mrs. Lucas proves it. It is composed by the ear, the spoken word on paper. Dio mio! What an escape I have had, Algernon! You had a plan to bring me and your Mrs. Lucas together to hear us talk. But she would smile to herself, and I should know what she was thinking, for she would be thinking how very poorly I talk Italian compared with herself. I will read her letter to you all, and though you do not know what it means you will recognize a fluency, a music . . ."

The Contessa proceeded to do so, with renewed exclamations of amazement, and all that bright edifice of suspicion, so carefully reared by the unfortunate Elizabeth, that Lucia knew no Italian collapsed like a house built of cards when the table is shaken. Elizabeth had induced everybody to accept invitations to the second po-di-mu in order that all Tilling might hear Lucia's ignorance exposed by the Contessa, and when she had wriggled out of that, Elizabeth's industrious efforts had caused the gravest suspicions to be entertained that Lucia's illness was feigned in order to avoid any encounter with one who did

know Italian, and now not only was not one pane of that Crystal Palace left unshattered, but the Contessa was congratulating herself on her own escape.

Elizabeth stirred feebly below the ruins: she was not quite crushed.

"I'm sure it sounds lovely," she said when the recitation was over. "But did not you yourself, dear Mr. Wyse, think it odd that anyone who knew Italian should put un po' di musica on her invitation-card?"

"Then he was wrong," said the Contessa. "No doubt that phrase is a little humorous quotation from something I do not know. Rather like you ladies of Tilling who so constantly say 'au reservoir.' It is not a mistake: it is a joke."

Elizabeth made a final effort.

"I wonder if dear Lucia wrote that note herself," she said pensively.

"Pish! Her parlour-maid, doubtless," said the Contessa. "For me, I must spend an hour this afternoon to see if I can answer that letter in a way that will not disgrace me."

There seemed little more to be said on that subject and Elizabeth hastily resumed her tantalization.

"Nobody has tried to guess yet what I saw from the church-tower," she said. "Major Benjy, you try! It was Lucia, but how was she dressed and what was she doing?"

There was a coldness about Major Benjy. He had allowed himself to suspect, owing to Elizabeth's delicate hints, that there was perhaps some Italian mystery behind Lucia's influenza, and now he must make amends.

"Couldn't say, I'm sure," he said. "She was sure to have been very nicely dressed from what I know of her."

"I'll give you a hint then," said she. "I've never seen her dressed like that before."

Major Benjy's attention completely wandered. He made no attempt to guess but sipped his coffee.

"You then, Mr. Wyse, if Major Benjy gives up," said

Elizabeth, getting anxious. Though the suspected cause of Lucia's illness was disproved, it still looked as if she had never had influenza at all, and that was something.

"My ingenuity, I am sure, will not be equal to the occasion," said Mr. Wyse, very politely. "You will be obliged to tell me. I give up."

Elizabeth emitted a shrill little titter.

"A dressing-gown," she said. "A bathing costume. And she was skipping! Fancy! With influenza!"

There was a dreadful pause. No babble of excited inquiry and comment took place at all. The Contessa put up her monocle, focused Elizabeth for a moment, and this pause somehow was like the hush that succeeds some slight *gaffe*, some small indelicacy that had better have been left unsaid. Her host came to her rescue.

"That is indeed good news," said Mr. Wyse. "We may encourage ourselves to hope that our friend is well on the road to convalescence. Thank you for telling us that, Miss Mapp."

Mrs. Bartlett gave one of her little mouselike squeals, and Irene said:

"Hurrah! I shall try to see her this afternoon. I am glad."

That again was an awful thought. Irene no doubt, if admitted, would give an account of the luncheon-party which would lose nothing in the telling, and she was such a ruthless mimic. Elizabeth felt a sinking feeling.

"Would that be wise, dear?" she said. "Lucia is probably not yet free from infection, and we mustn't have you down with it. I wonder where she caught it, by the way?"

"But your point is that she's never had influenza at all," said Irene with that dismal directness of hers.

Choking with this monstrous dose of fiasco, Elizabeth made for the present no further attempt to cause her friends to recoil from the idea of Lucia's skippings, for they only rejoiced that she was sufficiently recovered to do so. The party presently dispersed, and she walked

away with her sketching things and Diva, and glanced up the street towards her house. Irene was already standing by the door, and Elizabeth turned away with a shudder, for Irene waved her hand to them and was admitted.

"It's all very strange, dear Diva, isn't it?" she said. "It's impossible to believe that Lucia's been ill, and it's useless to try to do so. Then there's Mr. Georgie's disappearance. I never thought of that before."

Diva interrupted.

"If I were you, Elizabeth," she said, "I should hold my tongue about it all. Much wiser."

"Indeed?" said Elizabeth, beginning to tremble.

"Yes, I tell you so as a friend," continued Diva firmly. "You got hold of a false scent. You made us think that Lucia was avoiding the Faraglione. All wrong from beginning to end. One of your worst shots. Give it up."

"But there is something queer," said Elizabeth wildly. "Skipping——"

"If there is," said Diva, "you're not clever enough to find it out. That's my advice. Take it or leave it. I don't care. Au reservoir."