VII

HAD Miss Mapp been able to hear what went on in the garden-room that afternoon, as well as she had been able to see what had gone on that morning in the garden, she would never have found Irene more cruelly quaint. Her account of this luncheon-party was more than graphic, for so well did she reproduce the Contessa's fervid monologue and poor Elizabeth's teasings over what she wanted them all to guess, that it positively seemed to be illustrated. Almost more exasperating to Miss Mapp would have been Lucia's pitiful contempt for the impotence of her malicious efforts.

"Poor thing!" she said. "Sometimes I think she is a little mad. Una pazza: un po' pazza. . . . But I regret not seeing the Contessa. Nice of her to have approved of my scribbled note, and I daresay I should have found that she talked Italian very well indeed. To-morrow—for after my delicious exercise on the lawn this morning, I do not feel up to more to-day—to-morrow I should certainly have hoped to call—in the afternoon—and have had a chat with her. But she is leaving in the morning, I understand."

Lucia, looking the picture of vigour and vitality, swept across to the curtained window and threw back those screenings with a movement that made the curtain-rings chime together.

"Poor Elizabeth!" she repeated. "My heart aches for her, for I am sure all that carping bitterness makes her wretched. I daresay it is only physical: liver perhaps, or acidity. The ideal system of callisthenics might do wonders for her. I cannot, as you will readily under-

stand, dear Irene, make the first approaches to her after her conduct to me, and the dreadful innuendoes she has made, but I should like her to know that I bear her no malice at all. Do convey that to her some time. Tactfully, of course. Women like her who do all they can on every possible occasion to hurt and injure others are usually very sensitive themselves, and I would not add to the poor creature's other chagrins. You must all be kind to her."

"My dear, you're too wonderful!" said Irene, in a sort of ecstasy. "What a joy you are! But, alas, you're leaving us so soon. It's too unkind of you to desert us."

Lucia had dropped on to the music-stool by the piano which had so long been dumb, except for a few timorous chords muffled by the *unsustenuto* pedal, and dreamily recalled the first bars of the famous slow movement.

Irene sat down on the cold hot-water pipes and yearned at her.

"You can do everything," she said. "You play like an angel, and you can knock out Mapp with your little finger, and you can skip and play bridge, and you've got such a lovely nature that you don't bear Mapp the slightest grudge for her foul plots. You are adorable! Won't you ask me to come and stay with you at Riseholme sometime?"

Lucia, still keeping perfect time with her triplets while this recital of her perfections was going on, considered whether she should not tell Irene at once that she had practically determined not to desert them. She had intended to tell Georgie first, but she would do that when he came back to-morrow, and she wanted to see about getting a house here without delay. She played a nimble arpeggio on the chord of C sharp minor and closed the piano.

"Too sweet of you to like me, dear," she said, "but as for your staying with me at Riseholme, I don't think I shall ever go back there myself. I have fallen in love

with this dear Tilling, and I fully expect I shall settle here for good."

"Angel!" said Irene.

"I've been looking about for a house that might suit me," she continued when Irene had finished kissing her, "and the house-agents have just sent me the order to view one which particularly attracts me. It's that white house on the road that skirts the marsh, half a mile away. A nice garden sheltered from the north wind. Right down on the level, it is true, but such a divine view. Broad, tranquil! A dyke and a bank just across the road, keeping back the high tides in the river."

"But of course I know it; you mean Grebe," cried Irene. "The cottage I am in now adjoins the garden. Oh, do take it! While you're settling in, I'll let Diva have Taormina, and Diva will let Mapp have Wasters, and Mapp will let you have Mallards till Grebe's ready for you. And I shall be at your disposal all day to help you with your furniture."

Lucia decided that there was no real danger of meeting the Contessa if she drove out there: besides the Contessa now wanted to avoid her for fear of showing how inferior was her Italian.

"It's such a lovely afternoon," she said, "that I think a little drive would not hurt me. Unfortunately Georgie, who comes back to-morrow, has got my car. I lent it him for his week by the sea."

"Oh, how like you!" cried Irene. "Always unselfish!"

"Dear Georgie! So pleased to give him a little treat," said Lucia. "I'll ring up the garage and get them to send me something closed. Come with me, dear, if you have nothing particular to do, and we'll look over the house."

Lucia found much to attract her in Grebe. Though it was close to the road it was not overlooked, for a thick hedge of hornbeam made a fine screen: besides, the road did not lead anywhere particular. The rooms were

of good dimensions, there was a hall and dining-room on the ground floor, with a broad staircase leading up to the first floor where there were two or three bedrooms and a long admirable sitting-room with four windows looking across the road to the meadows and the high bank bounding the river. Beyond that lay the great empty levels of the marsh, with the hill of Tilling rising out of it half a mile away to the west. Close behind the house was the cliff which had once been the coast-line before the marshes were drained and reclaimed, and this would be a rare protection against northerly and easterly winds. All these pleasant rooms looked south, and all had this open view away seawards; they had character and dignity, and at once Lucia began to see herself living here. The kitchen and offices were in a wing by themselves, and here again there was character, for the kitchen had evidently been a coach-house, and still retained the big double doors appropriate to such. There had once been a road from it to the end of the kitchen garden, but with its disuse as a coach-house, the road had been replaced by a broad cinder-path now bordered with beds of useful vegetables.

"Ma molto conveniente," said Lucia more than once, for it was now perfectly safe to talk Italian again, since the Contessa, no less than she, was determined to avoid a duet in that language. "Mi piace molto. E un bel giardino."

"How I love hearing you talk Italian," ejaculated Irene, "especially since I know it's the very best. Will you teach it me? Oh, I am so pleased you like the house."

"But I am charmed with it," said Lucia. "And there's a garage with a very nice cottage attached which will do beautifully for Cadman and Foljambe."

She broke off suddenly, for in the fervour of her enthusiasm for the house, she had not thought about the awful catastrophe which must descend on Georgie, if she decided to live at Tilling. She had given no direct

thought to him, and now for the first time she realized the cruel blow that would await him, when he came back to-morrow, all bronzed from his week at Folkestone. He had been a real *Deus ex machina* to her: his stroke of genius had turned a very hazardous moment into a blaze of triumph, and now she was going to plunge a dagger into his domestic heart by the news that she and therefore Cadman and therefore Foljambe were not coming back to Riseholme at all. . . .

"Oh, are they going to marry?" asked Irene. "Or do you mean they just live together? How interesting!"

"Dear Irene, do not be so modern," said Lucia, quite sharply. "Marriage of course, and banns first. But never mind that for the present. I like those great double doors to the kitchen. I shall certainly keep them."

"How ripping that you're thinking about kitchen-doors already," said Irene. "That really sounds as if you did mean to buy the house. Won't Mapp have a fit when she hears it! I must be there when she's told. She'll say 'Darling Lulu, what a joy,' and then fall down and foam at the mouth."

Lucia gazed out over the marsh where the level rays of sunset turned a few low-lying skeins of mist to rose and gold. The tide was high and the broad channel of the river running out to sea was brimming from edge to edge. Here and there, where the banks were low, the water had overflowed on to adjacent margins of land; here and there, spread into broad lakes, it lapped the confining dykes. There were sheep cropping the meadows, there were sea-gulls floating on the water, and half a mile away to the west the red roofs of Tilling glowed as if molten not only with the soft brilliance of the evening light, but (to the discerning eye) with the intensity of the interests that burned beneath them. . . . Lucia hardly knew what gave her the most satisfaction, the magic of the marsh, her resolve to live here, or the recollection of the complete discomfiture of Elizabeth.

Then again the less happy thought of Georgie recurred, and she wondered what arguments she could use to induce him to leave Riseholme and settle here. Tilling with all its manifold interests would be incomplete without him, and how dismally incomplete Riseholme would be to him without herself and Foljambe. Georgie had of late taken his painting much more seriously than ever before, and he had often during the summer put off dinner to an unheard-of lateness in order to catch a sunset, and had risen at most inconvenient hours to catch a sunrise. Lucia had strongly encouraged this zeal, she had told him that if he was to make a real career as an artist he had no time to waste. Appreciation and spurring-on was what he needed: perhaps Irene could help.

She pointed to the glowing landscape.

"Irene, what would life be without sunsets?" she asked. "And to think that this miracle happens every day, except when it's very cloudy!"

Irene looked critically at the view.

"Generally speaking, I don't like sunsets," she said. "The composition of the sky is usually childish. But good colouring about this one."

"There are practically no sunsets at Riseholme," said Lucia. "I suppose the sun goes down, but there's a row of hills in the way. I often think that Georgie's development as an artist is starved there. If he goes back there he will find no one to make him work. What do you think of his painting, dear?"

"I don't think of it at all," said Irene.

"No? I am astonished. Of course your own is so different in character. Those wrestlers! Such movement! But personally I find very great preception in Georgie's work. A spaciousness, a calmness! I wish you would take an interest in it and encourage him. You can find beauty anywhere if you look for it."

"Of course I'll do my best if you want me to," said Irene. "But it will be hard work to find beauty in Georgie's little valentines."

"Do try. Give him some hints. Make him see what you see. All that boldness and freedom. That's what he wants. . . . Ah, the sunset is fading. Buona notte, bel sole! We must be getting home too. Addio, mia bella casa. But Georgie must be the first to know, Irene, do not speak of it until I have told him. Poor Georgie: I hope it will not be a terrible blow to him."

Georgie came straight to Mallards on his arrival next morning from Folkestone with Cadman and Foljambe. His recall, he knew, meant that the highly dangerous Contessa had gone, and his admission by Grosvenor, after the door had been taken off the chain, that Lucia's influenza was officially over. He looked quite bronzed, and she gave him the warmest welcome.

"It all worked without a hitch," she said as she told him of the plots and counter-plots which had woven so brilliant a tapestry of events. "And it was that letter of Mrs. Brocklebank's which you sent me that clapped the lid on Elizabeth. I saw at once what I could make of it. Really, Georgie, I turned it into a stroke of genius."

"But it was a stroke of genius already," said Georgie. "You only had to copy it out and send it to the Contessa."

Lucia was slightly ashamed of having taken the supreme credit for herself: the habit was hard to get rid of.

"My dear, all the credit shall be yours then," she said handsomely. "It was your stroke of genius. I copied it out very carelessly as if I had scribbled it off without thought. That was a nice touch, don't you think? The effect? Colossal, so Irene tells me, for I could not be there myself. That was only yesterday. A few desperate wriggles from Elizabeth, but of course no good. I do not suppose there was a more thoroughly thwarted woman in all Sussex than she."

Georgie gave a discreet little giggle.

"And what's so terribly amusing is that she was right

all the time about your influenza and your Italian and everything," he said. " Perfectly maddening for her."

Lucia sighed pensively.

" Georgie, she was malicious," she observed, " and that never pays."

" Besides, it serves her right for spying on you," Georgie continued.

" Yes, poor thing. But I shall begin now at once to be kind to her again. She shall come to lunch to-morrow, and you of course. By the way, Georgie, Irene takes so much interest in your painting. It was news to me, for her style is so different from your beautiful, careful work."

" No ! That's news to me too," said Georgie. " She never seemed to see my sketches before : they might have been blank sheets of paper. Does she mean it ? She's not pulling my leg ? "

" Nothing of the sort. And I couldn't help thinking it was a great opportunity for you to learn something about more modern methods. There is something you know in those fierce canvasses of hers."

" I wish she had told me sooner," said Georgie. " We've only got a fortnight more here. I shall be very sorry when it's over, for I felt terribly pleased to be getting back to Tilling this morning. It'll be dull going back to Riseholme. Don't you feel that too ? I'm sure you must. No plots : no competition."

Lucia had just received a telegram from Adele concerning the purchase of the Hurst, and it was no use putting off the staggering moment. She felt as if she was Zeus about to discharge a thunderbolt on some unhappy mortal.

" Georgie, I'm not going back to Riseholme at all," she said. " I have sold the Hurst : Adele Brixton has bought it. And, practically, I've bought that white house with the beautiful garden, which we admired so much, and that view over the marsh (how I thought of you at sunset yesterday), and really charming rooms with character."

Georgie sat open-mouthed, and all expression vanished from his face. It became as blank as a piece of sunburnt

paper. Then slowly, as if he was coming round from an anæsthetic while the surgeon was still carving dexterously at living tissue, a look of intolerable anguish came into his face.

"But Foljambe, Cadman!" he cried. "Foljambe can't come back here every night from Riseholme. What am I to do? Is it all irrevocable?"

Lucia bridled. She was quite aware that this parting (if there was to be one) between him and Foljambe would be a dagger; but it was surprising, to say the least, that the thought of the parting between herself and him should not have administered him the first shock. However, there it was. Foljambe first by all means.

"I knew parting from Foljambe would be a great blow to you," she said, with an acidity that Georgie could hardly fail to notice. "What a pity that row you told me about came to nothing! But I am afraid that I can't promise to live in Riseholme for ever in order that you may not lose your parlour-maid."

"But it's not only that," said Georgie, aware of this acidity and hastening to sweeten it. "There's you as well. It will be ditch-water at Riseholme without you."

"Thank you, Georgie," said Lucia. "I wondered if and when, as the lawyers say, you would think of that. No reason why you should, of course."

Georgie felt that this was an unjust reproach.

"Well, after all, you settled to live in Tilling," he retorted, "and said nothing about how dull it would be without me. And I've got to do without Foljambe as well."

Lucia had recourse to the lowest artifice.

"Georgie-orgie, oo not cwoss with me?" she asked in an innocent, childish voice.

Georgie was not knocked out by this sentimental stroke below the belt. It was like Lucia to settle everything in exactly the way that suited her best, and then expect her poor pawns to be stricken at the thought of losing their queen. Besides, the loss of Foljambe *had*

occurred to him first. Comfort, like charity, began at home.

"No, I'm not cross," he said, utterly refusing to adopt baby-talk which implied surrender. "But I've got every right to be hurt with you for settling to live in Tilling and not saying a word about how you would miss me."

"My dear, I knew you would take that for granted," began Lucia.

"Then why shouldn't you take it for granted about me?" he observed.

"I ought to have," she said. "I confess it, so that's all right. But why don't you leave Riseholme too and settle here, Georgie? Foljambe, me, your career, now that Irene is so keen about your pictures, and this marvellous sense of not knowing what's going to happen next. Such stimulus, such stuff to keep the soul awake. And you don't want to go back to Riseholme: you said so yourself. You'd moulder and vegetate there."

"It's different for you," said Georgie. "You've sold your house and I haven't sold mine. But there it is: I shall go back, I suppose, without Foljambe or you—I mean you or Foljambe. I wish I had never come here at all. It was that week when we went back for the fête, leaving Cadman and her here, which did all the mischief."

There was no use in saying anything more at present, and Georgie, feeling himself the victim of an imperious friend and of a faithless parlour-maid, went sadly back to Mallards Cottage. Lucia had settled to leave Riseholme without the least thought of what injury she inflicted on him by depriving him at one fell blow of Foljambe and her own companionship. He was almost sorry he had sent her that wonderful Brocklebank letter, for she had been in a very tight place, especially when Miss Mapp had actually seen her stripped and skipping in the garden as a cure for influenza; and had he not, by his stroke of genius, come to her rescue, her reputation here might have suffered an irretrievable eclipse, and

they might all have gone back to Riseholme together. As it was, he had established her on the most exalted pinnacle and her thanks for that boon were expressed by dealing this beastly blow at him.

He threw himself down, in deep dejection, on the sofa in the little parlour of Mallards Cottage, in which he had been so comfortable. Life at Tilling had been full of congenial pleasures, and what a spice all these excitements had added to it! He had done a lot of painting, endless subjects still awaited his brush, and it had given him a thrill of delight to know that quaint Irene, with all her modern notions about art, thought highly of his work. Then there was the diversion of observing and nobly assisting in Lucia's campaign for the sovereignty, and her wars, as he knew, were far from won yet, for Tilling certainly had grown restive under her patronizings and acts of autocracy, and there was probably life in the old dog (meaning Elizabeth Mapp) yet. It was dreadful to think that he would not witness the campaign that was now being planned in those Napoleonic brains. These few weeks that remained to him here would be blackened by the thought of the wretched future that awaited him, and there would be no savour in them, for in so short a time now he would go back to Riseholme in a state of the most pitiable widowerhood, deprived of the ministering care of Foljambe, who all these years had made him so free from household anxieties, and of the companion who had spurred him on to ambitions and activities. Though he had lain awake shuddering at the thought that perhaps Lucia expected him to marry her, he felt he would almost sooner have done that than lose her altogether. "It may be better to have loved and lost," thought Georgie, "than never to have loved at all, but it's very poor work not having loved and also to have lost." . . .

There was Foljambe singing in a high buzzing voice as she unpacked his luggage in his room upstairs, and though it was a rancid noise, how often had it filled him with the liveliest satisfaction, for Foljambe seldom sang,

and when she did, it meant that she was delighted with her lot in life and was planning fresh efforts for his comfort. Now, no doubt, she was planning all sorts of pleasures for Cadman, and not thinking of him at all. Then there was Lucia: through his open window he could already hear the piano in the garden-room, and that showed a horrid callousness to his miserable plight. She didn't care; she was rolling on like the moon or the car of Juggernaut. It was heartless of her to occupy herself with those gay tinkling tunes, but the fact was that she was odiously selfish, and cared about nothing but her own successes. . . . He abstracted himself from those painful reflections for a moment and listened more attentively. It was clearly Mozart that she was practising, but the melody was new to him. "I bet," thought Georgie, "that this evening or to-morrow she'll ask me to read over a new Mozart, and it'll be that very piece that she's practising now."

His bitterness welled up within him again, as that pleasing reflection faded from his mind, and almost involuntarily he began to revolve how he could pay her back for her indifference to him. A dark but brilliant thought (like a black pearl) occurred to him. What if he dismissed his own chauffeur, Dickie, at present in the employment of his tenant at Riseholme, and, by a prospect of a rise in wages, seduced Cadman from Lucia's service, and took him and Foljambe back to Riseholme? He would put into practise the plan that Lucia herself had suggested, of establishing them in a cottage of their own, with a charwoman, so that Foljambe's days should be his, and her nights Cadman's. That would be a nasty one for Lucia, and the idea was feasible, for Cadman didn't think much of Tilling, and might easily fall in with it. But hardly had this devilish device occurred to him than his better nature rose in revolt against it. It would serve Lucia right, it is true, but it was unworthy of him. "I should be descending to her level," thought Georgie very nobly, "if I did such a thing. Besides, how awful

it would be if Cadman said no, and then told her that I had tempted him. She would despise me for doing it, as much as I despise her, and she would gloat over me for having failed. It won't do. I must be more manly about it all somehow. I must be like Major Benjy and say 'Damn the woman! Faugh!' and have a drink. But I feel sick at the idea of going back to Riseholme alone. . . . I wish I had eyebrows like a pastebrush, and could say damn properly."

With a view to being more manly he poured himself out a very small whisky and soda, and his eye fell on a few letters lying for him on the table, which must have come that morning. There was one with the Riseholme postmark, and the envelope was of that very bright blue which he always used. His own stationery evidently, of which he had left a supply, without charge, for the use of his tenant. He opened it, and behold there was dawn breaking on his dark life, for Colonel Cresswell wanted to know if he had any thoughts of selling his house. He was much taken by Riseholme, his sister had bought the Hurst, and he would like to be near her. Would Georgie therefore let him have a line about this as soon as possible, for there was another house, Mrs. Quantock's, about which he would enter into negotiations, if there was no chance of getting Georgie's. . . .

The revulsion of feeling was almost painful. Georgie had another whisky and soda at once, not because he was depressed, but because he was so happy. "But I mustn't make a habit of it," he thought, as he seized his pen.

Georgie's first impulse when he had written his letter to Colonel Cresswell was to fly round to Mallards with this wonderful news, but now he hesitated. Some hitch might arise, the price Colonel Cresswell proposed might not come up to his expectations, though—God knew—he would not dream of haggling over any reasonable offer. Lucia would rejoice at the chance of his staying in Tilling, but she did not deserve to have such a treat of pleasurable

expectation for the present. Besides, though he had been manly enough to reject with scorn the wiles of the devil who had suggested the seduction of Cadman, he thought he would tease her a little even if his dream came true. He had often told her that if he was rich enough he would have a flat in London, and now, if this sale of his house came off, he would pretend that he was not meaning to live in Tilling at all, but would live in Town, and he would see how she would take that. It would be her turn to be hurt, and serve her right. So instead of interrupting the roulades of Mozart that were pouring from the window of the garden-room, he walked briskly down to the High Street to see how Tilling was taking the news that it would have Lucia always with it, if her purchase of Grebe had become public property. If not, he would have the pleasure of disseminating it.

There was a hint of seafaring about Georgie's costume as befitted one who had lately spent so much time on the pier at Folkestone. He had a very nautical-looking cap, with a black shining brim, a dark-blue double-breasted coat, white trousers and smart canvas shoes: really he might have been supposed to have come up to Tilling in his yacht, and have landed to see the town. . . . A piercing whistle from the other side of the street showed him that his appearance had at once attracted attention, and there was Irene planted with her easel in the middle of the pavement, and painting a row of flayed carcases that hung in the butcher's shop. Rembrandt had better look out. . . .

"Avast there, Georgie," she cried. "Home is the sailor, home from sea. Come and talk."

This was rather more attention than Georgie had anticipated, but as Irene was quite capable of shouting nautical remarks after him if he pretended not to hear, he tripped across the street to her.

"Have you seen Lucia, Commodore?" she said. "And has she told you?"

"About her buying Grebe?" asked Georgie. "Oh, yes."

"That's all right then. She told me not to mention it till she'd seen you. Mapp's popping in and out of the shops, and I simply must be the first to tell her. Don't cut in in front of me, will you? Oh, by the way, have you done any sketching at Folkestone?"

"One or two," said Georgie. "Nothing very much."

"Nonsense. Do let me come and see them. I love your handling. Just cast your eye over this and tell me what's wrong with—— There she is. Hi! Mapp!"

Elizabeth, like Georgie, apparently thought it more prudent to answer that summons and avoid further public proclamation of her name, and came hurrying across the street.

"Good morning, Irene mine," she said. "What a beautiful picture! All the poor skinned piggies in a row, or are they sheep? Back again, Mr. Georgie? How we've missed you. And how do you think dear Lulu is looking after her illness?"

"Mapp, there's news for you," said Irene, remembering the luncheon-party yesterday. "You must guess: I shall tease you. It's about your Lulu. Three guesses."

"Not a relapse, I hope?" said Elizabeth brightly.

"Quite wrong. Something much nicer. You'll enjoy it tremendously."

"Another of those beautiful musical parties?" asked Elizabeth. "Or has she skipped a hundred times before breakfast?"

"No, much nicer," said Irene. "Heavenly for us all."

A look of apprehension had come over Elizabeth's face, as an awful idea occurred to her.

"Dear one, give over teasing," she said. "Tell me."

"She's not going away at the end of the month," said Irene. "She's bought Grebe."

Blank dismay spread over Elizabeth's face.

"Oh, what a joy!" she said. "Lovely news."

She hurried off to Wasters, too much upset even to make Diva, who was coming out of Twistevant's, a partner in her joy. Only this morning she had been consulting

her calendar and observing that there were only fifteen days more before Tilling was quit of Lulu, and now at a moderate estimate there might be at least fifteen years of her. Then she found she could not bear the weight of her joy alone and sped back after Diva.

"Diva dear, come in for a minute," she said. "I've heard something."

Diva looked with concern at that lined and agitated face.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Nothing serious?"

"Oh no, lovely news," she said with bitter sarcasm. "Tilling will rejoice. *She's* not going away. *She's* going to stop here for ever."

There was no need to ask who "she" was. For weeks Lucia had been "she." If you meant Susan Wyse, or Diva or Irene, you said so. But "she" was Lucia.

"I suspected as much," said Diva. "I know she had an order to view Grebe."

Elizabeth, in a spasm of exasperation, banged the door of Wasters so violently after she and Diva had entered, that the house shook and a note leaped from the wire letter-box on to the floor.

"Steady on with my front door," said Diva, "or there'll be some dilapidations to settle."

Elizabeth took no notice of this petty remark, and picked up the note. The handwriting was unmistakable, for Lucia's study of Homer had caused her (subconsciously or not) to adopt a modified form of Greek script, and she made her "a" like alpha and her "e" like epsilon. At the sight of it Elizabeth suffered a complete loss of self-control, she held the note on high as if exposing a relic to the gaze of pious worshippers, and made a low curtsey to it.

"And this is from Her," she said. "Oh, how kind of Her Majesty to write to me in her own hand with all those ridiculous twiddles. Not content with speaking Italian quite perfectly, she must also write in Greek. I daresay she talks it beautifully too."

"Come, pull yourself together, Elizabeth," said Diva.

"I am not aware that I am coming to bits, dear," said Elizabeth, opening the note with the very tips of her fingers, as if it had been written by someone infected with plague or at least influenza. "But let me see what Her Majesty says. . . . 'Dearest Liblib' . . . the impertinence of it! Or is it Riseholme humour?"

"Well, you call her Lulu," said Diva. "Do get on."

Elizabeth frowned with the difficulty of deciphering this crabbed handwriting.

"'Now that I am quite free of infection,' she read—(Infection indeed. She never had flu at all)—'of infection, I can receive my friends again, and hope so much you will lunch with me to-morrow. I hasten also to tell you of my change of plans, for I have so fallen in love with your delicious Tilling that I have bought a house here—(Stale news!)—and shall settle into it next month. An awful wrench, as you may imagine, to leave my dear Riseholme—(Then why wrench yourself?)—. . . and poor Georgie is in despair, but Tilling and all you dear people have wrapt yourselves round my heart. (Have we? The same to you!)—and it is no use my struggling to get free. I wonder therefore if you would consider letting me take your beautiful Mallards at the same rent for another month, while Grebe is being done up, and my furniture being installed? I should be so grateful if this is possible, otherwise I shall try to get Mallards Cottage when my Georgie—(My!)—goes back to Riseholme. Could you, do you think, let me know about this to-morrow, if, as I hope, you will send me "un' amabile 'si' "—(What in the world is an amabile si?)—and come to lunch? Tanti saluti, Lucia.'"

"I understand," said Diva. "It means 'an amiable yes,' about going to lunch."

"Thank you, Diva. You are quite an Italian scholar too," said Elizabeth. "I call that a thoroughly heartless letter. And all of us, mark you, must serve her con-

venience. I can't get back into Mallards, because She wants it, and even if I refused, She would be next door at Mallards Cottage. I've never been so long out of my own house before."

Both ladies felt that it would be impossible to keep up any semblance of indignation that Lucia was wanting to take Mallards for another month, for it suited them both so marvellously well.

"You are in luck," said Diva, "getting another month's let at that price. So am I too, if you want to stop here, for Irene is certain to let me stay on at her house, because her cottage is next to Grebe, and she'll be in and out all day——"

"Poor Irene seems to be under a sort of spell," said Elizabeth in parenthesis. "She can think about nothing except that woman. Her painting has fallen off terribly. Coarsened. . . . Yes, dear, I think I will give the Queen of the Italian language an amabile si about Mallards. I don't know if you would consider taking rather a smaller rent for November. Winter prices are always lower."

"Certainly not," said Diva. "You're going to get the same as before for Mallards."

"That's my affair, dear," said Elizabeth.

"And this is mine," said Diva firmly. "And will you go to lunch with her to-morrow?"

Elizabeth, now comparatively calm, sank down in the window seat, which commanded so good a view of the High Street.

"I suppose I shall have to," she said. "One must be civil, whatever has happened. Oh, there's Major Benjy. I wonder if he's heard."

She tapped at the window and threw it open. He came hurrying across the street and began to speak in a loud voice before she could get in a word.

"That amusing guessing game of yours, Miss Elizabeth," he said, just like Irene. "About Mrs. Lucas. I'll give you three——"

"One's enough: we all know," said Elizabeth. "Joyful news, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is delightful to know that we are not going to lose one who—who has endeared herself to us all so much," said he very handsomely.

He stopped. His tone lacked sincerity; there seemed to be something in his mind which he left unsaid. Elizabeth gave him a piercing and confidential look.

"Yes, Major Benjy?" she suggested.

He glanced round like a conspirator to see there was no one eavesdropping.

"Those parties, you know," he said. "Those entertainments which we've all enjoyed so much. Beautiful music. But Grebe's a long way off on a wet winter night. Not just round the corner. Now if she was settling in Mallards——"

He saw at once what an appalling interpretation might be put on this, and went on in a great hurry.

"You'll have to come to our rescue, Miss Elizabeth," he said, dropping his voice so that even Diva could not hear. "When you're back in your own house again, you'll have to look after us all as you always used to. Charming woman, Mrs. Lucas, and most hospitable, I'm sure, but in the winter, as I was saying, that long way out of Tilling, just to hear a bit of music, and have a tomato, if you see what I mean."

"Why, of course I see what you mean," murmured Elizabeth. "The dear thing, as you say, is so hospitable. Lovely music and tomatoes, but we must make a stand."

"Well, you can have too much of a good thing," said Major Benjy, "and for my part a little Mozart lasts me a long time, especially if it's a long way on a wet night. Then I'm told there's an idea of Callisthenic classes, though no doubt they would be for ladies only——"

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," said Elizabeth. "Our dear friend has got enough—shall we call it self-confidence?—to think herself capable of teaching any-

body anything. If you aren't careful, Major Benjy, you'll find yourself in a skipping match on the lawn at Grebe, before you know what you're doing. You've been King Cophetua already, which I, for one, never thought to see."

"That was just once in a way," said he. "But when it comes to Callisthenic classes——"

Diva, in an agony at not being able to hear what was going on, had crept up behind Elizabeth, and now crouched close to her as she stood leaning out of the window. At this moment, Lucia, having finished her piano-practice, came round the corner from Mallards into the High Street. Elizabeth hastily withdrew from the window and bumped into Diva.

"So sorry: didn't know you were there, dear," she said. "We must put our heads together another time, Major Benjy. Au reservoir."

She closed the window.

"Oh, do tell me what you're going to put your heads together about," said Diva. "I only heard just the end."

It was important to get allies: otherwise Elizabeth would have made a few well-chosen remarks about eavesdroppers.

"It is sad to find that just when Lucia has settled never to leave us any more," she said, "that there should be so much feeling in Tilling about being told to do this and being made to listen to that. Major Benjy—I don't know if you heard that part, dear—spoke very firmly, and I thought sensibly about it. The question really is if England is a free country or not, and whether we're going to be trampled upon. We've been very happy in Tilling all these years, going our own way, and living in sweet harmony together, and I for one, and Major Benjy for another, don't intend to put our necks under the yoke. I don't know how you feel about it. Perhaps you like it, for after all you were Mary Queen of Scots just as much as Major Benjy was King Cophetua."

"I won't go to any po-di-mus, after dinner at Grebe," said Diva. "I shouldn't have gone to the last, but you persuaded us all to go. Where was your neck then, Elizabeth? Be fair."

"Be fair yourself, Diva," said Elizabeth with some heat. "You know perfectly well that I wanted you to go in order that you might all get your necks from under her yoke, and hear that she couldn't speak a word of Italian."

"And a nice mess you made of that," said Diva. "But never mind. She's established now as a perfect Italian linguist, and there it is. Don't meddle with that again, or you'll only prove that she can talk Greek too."

Elizabeth rose and pointed at her like one of Raphael's Sibyls.

"Diva, to this day I don't believe she can talk Italian. It was a conjuring trick, and I'm no conjurer but a plain woman, and I can't tell you how it was done. But I will swear it was a trick. Besides, answer me this! Why doesn't she offer to give us Italian lessons if she knows it? She has offered to teach us bridge and Homer and Callisthenics and take choir-practices and arranged tableaux. Why not Italian?"

"That's curious," said Diva thoughtfully.

"Not the least curious. The reason is obvious. Everyone snubbed me and scolded me, you among others, at that dreadful luncheon-party, but I know I'm right, and some day the truth will come out. I can wait. Meantime what she means to do is to take us all in hand, and I won't be taken in hand. What is needed from us all is a little firmness."

Diva went home thrilled to the marrow of her bones at the thought of the rich entertainment that these next months promised to provide. Naturally she saw through Elizabeth's rodomontade about yokes and free countries: what she meant was that she intended to assert herself again, and topple Lucia over. Two could not

reign in Tilling, as everybody could see by this time. "All most interesting," said Diva to herself. "Elizabeth's got hold of Major Benjy for the present, and Lucia's going to lose Georgie, but then men don't count for much in Tilling: it's brains that do it. There'll be more bridge-parties and teas this winter than ever before. Really, I don't know which of them I would back. Hullo, there's a note from her. Lunch to-morrow, I expect. . . . I thought so."

Lucia's luncheon-party next day was to be of the nature of a banquet to celebrate the double event of her recovery and of the fact that Tilling, instead of mourning her approaching departure, was privileged to retain her, as Elizabeth had said, for ever and ever. The whole circle of her joyful friends would be there, and she meant to give them to eat of the famous dish of lobster *à la Rischolme*, which she had provided for Georgie, a few weeks ago, to act as a buffer to break the shock of Foljambe's engagement. It had already produced a great deal of wild surmise in the minds of the housewives at Tilling, for no one could conjecture how it was made, and Lucia had been deaf to all requests for the recipe: Elizabeth had asked her twice to give it her, but Lucia had merely changed the subject without attempt at transition: she had merely talked about something quite different. This secretiveness was considered unamiable, for the use of Tilling was to impart its culinary mysteries to friends, so that they might enjoy their favourite dishes at each other's houses, and lobster *à la Riseholme* had long been an agonizing problem to Elizabeth. She had made an attempt at it herself, but the result was not encouraging. She had told Diva and the Padre that she felt sure she had "guessed it," and, when bidden to come to lunch and partake of it, they had both anticipated a great treat. But Elizabeth had clearly guessed wrong, for lobster *à la Riseholme à la Mapp* had been found to consist of something resembling lumps of india-rubber (so tough that the teeth positively bounced

away from them on contact) swimming in a dubious pink gruel, and both of them left a great deal on their plates, concealed as far as possible under their knives and forks, though their hostess continued manfully to chew, till her jaw-muscles gave out. Then Elizabeth had had recourse to underhand methods. Lucia had observed her more than once in the High Street, making herself suspiciously pleasant to her cook, and from the window of the garden-room just before her influenza, she had seen her at the back door of Mallards again in conversation with the lady of the kitchen. On this occasion, with an unerring conviction in her mind, she had sent for her cook and asked her what Miss Mapp wanted. It was even so: Elizabeth's ostensible inquiry was for an egg-whisk, which she had left by mistake at Mallards three months ago, but then she had unmasked her batteries, and, actually fingering a bright half-crown, had asked point-blank for the recipe of this lobster *à la Riseholme*. The cook had given her a polite but firm refusal, and Lucia was now more determined than ever that Elizabeth should never know the exquisite secret. She naturally felt that it was beneath her to take the slightest notice of this low and paltry attempt to obtain by naked bribery a piece of private knowledge, and she never let Elizabeth know that she was cognizant of it.

During the morning before Lucia's luncheon-party a telegram had come for Georgie from Colonel Cresswell making a firm and very satisfactory offer for his house at Riseholme, unfurnished. That had made him really busy: first he had to see Foljambe and tell her (under seal of secrecy, for he had his little plot of teasing Lucia in mind) that he was proposing to settle in Tilling. Foljambe was very pleased to hear it, and in a burst of most unusual feeling, had said that it would have gone to her heart to leave his service, after so many harmonious years, when he went back to Riseholme, and that she was very glad to adopt the plan, which she had agreed to, when it was supposed that they would all

go back to Riseholme together. She would do her work all day in Georgie's house, and retire in the evening to the connubialities of the garage at Grebe. When this affecting interview was over, she went back to her jobs, and again Georgie heard her singing as she cleaned the silver. "So that's beautiful," he said to himself, "and the cloud has passed for ever. Now I must instantly see about getting a house here."

He hurried out. There was still an hour before he was due at the lobster lunch. Though he had left the seaside twenty-four hours ago, he put on his yachtsman's cap and, walking on air, set off for the house-agent's. Of all the houses in the place which he had seen, he was sure that none would suit him as well as this dear little Mallards Cottage which he now occupied; he liked it, Foljambe liked it, they all liked it, but he had no idea whether he could get a lease from kippered Isabel. As he crossed the High Street, a wild hoot from a motor-horn just behind him gave him a dreadful fright, but he jumped nimbly for the pavement, reached it unhurt, and though his cap fell off and landed in a puddle, he was only thankful to have escaped being run down by Isabel Poppit on her motor-cycle. Her hair was like a twisted mop, her skin incredibly tanned, and mounted on her cycle she looked like a sort of modernized Valkyrie in rather bad repair. . . . Meeting her just at this moment, when he was on his way to inquire about Mallards Cottage, seemed a good omen to Georgie, and he picked up his cap and ran back across the street, for in her natural anxiety to avoid killing him she had swerved into a baker's cart, and had got messed up in the wheels.

"I do apologize, Miss Poppit," he said. "Entirely my fault for not looking both ways before I crossed."

"No harm done," said she. "Oh, your beautiful cap. I am sorry. But after all the wonderful emptiness and silence among the sand-dunes, a place like a town seems to me a positive nightmare."

"Well, the emptiness and silence does seem to suit you," said Georgie, gazing in astonishment at her mahogany face. "I never saw anybody looking so well."

Isabel, with a tug of her powerful arms, disentangled her cycle.

"It's the simple life," said she, shaking her hair out of her eyes. "Never again will I live in a town. I have taken the bungalow I am in now for six months more, and I only came in to Tilling to tell the house-agent to get another tenant for Mallards Cottage, as I understand that you're going back to Riseholme at the end of this month."

Georgie had never felt more firmly convinced that a wise and beneficent Providence looked after him with the most amiable care.

"And I was also on my way to the house-agent's," he said, "to see if I could get a lease of it."

"Gracious! What a good thing I didn't run over you just now," said Isabel, with all the simplicity derived from the emptiness and silence of sand-dunes. "Come on to the agent's."

Within half an hour the whole business was as good as settled. Isabel held a lease from her mother of Mallards Cottage, which had five years yet to run, and she agreed to transfer this to Georgie, and store her furniture. He had just time to change into his new mustard-coloured suit with its orange tie and its topaz tie-pin, and arrived at the luncheon-party in the very highest spirits. Besides, there was his talk with Lucia when other guests had gone, to look forward to. How he would tease her about settling in London!

Though Tilling regarded the joyful prospect of Lucia's never going away again with certain reservations, and, in the case of Elizabeth, with nothing but reservations, her guests vied with each other in the fervency of their self-congratulations, and Elizabeth outdid them all, as she took into her mouth small fragments of lobster, in the manner of a wine-taster, appraising subtle flavours.

There was cheese, there were shrimps, there was cream: there were so many things that she felt like Adam giving names to the innumerable procession of different animals. She had helped herself so largely that when the dish came to Georgie there was nothing left but a little pink juice, but he hardly minded at all, so happy had the events of the morning made him. Then when Elizabeth felt that she would choke if she said anything more in praise of Lucia, Mr. Wyse took it up, and Georgie broke in and said it was cruel of them all to talk about the delicious busy winter they would have, when they all knew that he would not be here any longer but back at Riseholme. In fact, he rather overdid his lamentations, and Lucia, whose acute mind detected the grossest insincerity in Elizabeth's raptures, began to wonder whether Georgie for some unknown reason was quite as woeful as he professed to be. Never had he looked more radiant, not a shadow of disappointment had come over his face when he inspected the casserole that had once contained his favourite dish, and found nothing left for him. There was something up—what on earth could it be? Had Foljambe jilted Cadman?—and just as Elizabeth was detecting flavours in the mysterious dish, so Lucia was trying to arrive at an analysis of the gay glad tones in which Georgie expressed his misery.

"It's too tarsome of you all to go on about the lovely things you're going to do," he said. "Callisthenic classes and Homer and bridge, and poor me far away. I shall tell myself every morning that I hate Tilling; I shall say like Coué, 'Day by day in every way, I dislike it more and more,' until I've convinced myself that I shall be glad to go."

Mr. Wyse made him a beautiful bow.

"We too shall miss you very sadly, Mr. Pillson," he said, "and for my part I shall be tempted to hate Riseholme for taking from us one who has so endeared himself to us."

"I ask to be allowed to associate myself with those

sentiments," said Major Benjy, whose contempt for Georgie and his sketches and his needlework had been intensified by the sight of his yachting cap, which he had pronounced to be only fit for a popinjay. It had been best to keep on good terms with him while Lucia was at Mallards, for he might poison her mind about himself, and now that he was going, there was no harm in these handsome remarks. Then the Padre said something Scotch and sympathetic and regretful, and Georgie found himself, slightly to his embarrassment, making bows and saying " thank you " right and left in acknowledgment of these universal expressions of regret that he was so soon about to leave them. It was rather awkward, for within a few hours they would all know that he had taken Mallards Cottage unfurnished for five years, which did not look like an immediate departure. But this little deception was necessary if he was to bring off his joke against Lucia, and make her think that he meant to settle in London. And after all, since everybody seemed so sorry that (as they imagined) he was soon to leave Tilling, they ought to be very much pleased to find that he was doing nothing of the kind.

The guests dispersed soon after lunch and Georgie, full of mischief and naughtiness, lingered with his hostess in the garden-room. All her gimlet glances during lunch had failed to fathom his high good humour : here was he on the eve of parting with his Foljambe and herself, and yet his face beamed with content. Lucia was in very good spirits also, for she had seen Elizabeth's brow grow more and more furrowed as she strove to find a formula for the lobster.

" What a lovely luncheon-party, although I got no lobster at all," said Georgie, as he settled himself for his teasing. " I did enjoy it. And Elizabeth's rapture at your stopping here ! She must have an awful blister on her tongue."

Lucia sighed.

" Sapphira must look to her laurels, poor thing," she

observed pensively. "And how sorry they all were that you are going away."

"Wasn't it nice of them?" said Georgie. "But never mind that now: I've got something wonderful to tell you. I've never felt happier in my life, for the thing I've wanted for so many years can be managed at last. You will be pleased for my sake."

Lucia laid a sympathetic hand on his. She felt that she had shown too little sympathy with one who was to lose his parlour-maid and his oldest friend so soon. But the gaiety with which he bore this double stroke was puzzling. . . .

"Dear Georgie," she said, "anything that makes you happy makes me happy. I am rejoiced that something of the sort has occurred. Really rejoiced. Tell me what it is instantly."

Georgie drew a long breath. He wanted to give it out all in a burst of triumph like a fanfare.

"Too lovely," he said. "Colonel Cresswell has bought my house at Riseholme—such a good price—and now at last I shall be able to settle in London. I was just as tired of Riseholme as you, and now I shall never see it again or Tilling either. Isn't it a dream? Riseholme, stuffy little Mallards Cottage, all things of the past! I shall have a nice little home in London, and you must promise to come up and stay with me sometimes. How I looked forward to telling you! Orchestral concerts at Queen's Hall, instead of our fumbling little arrangements of Mozartino for four hands. Pictures, a club if I can afford it, and how nice to think of you so happy down at Tilling! As for all the fuss I made yesterday about losing Foljambe, I can't think why it seemed to me so terrible."

Lucia gave him one more gimlet glance, and found she did not believe a single word he was saying except as regards the sale of his house at Riseholme. All the rest must be lies, for the Foljambe-wound could not possibly have healed so soon. But she instantly made

up her mind to pretend to believe him, and clapped her hands for pleasure.

"Dear Georgie! What splendid news!" she said. "I am pleased. I've always felt that you, with all your keenness and multifarious interests in life, were throwing your life away in these little backwaters like Riseholme and Tilling. London is the only place for you! Now tell me: Are you going to get a flat or a house? And where is it to be? If I were you I should have a house!"

This was not quite what Georgie had expected. He had thought that Lucia would suggest that now that he was quit of Riseholme he positively must come to Tilling, but not only did she fail to do that, but she seemed delighted that no such thought had entered into his head.

"I haven't really thought about that yet," he said. "There's something to be said for a flat."

"No doubt. It's more compact, and then there's no bother about rates and taxes. And you'll have your car, I suppose. And will your cook go with you? What does she say to it all?"

"I haven't told her yet," said Georgie, beginning to get a little pensive.

"Really? I should have thought you would have done that at once. And isn't Foljambe pleased that you are so happy again?"

"She doesn't know yet," said Georgie. "I thought I would tell you first."

"Dear Georgie, how sweet of you," said Lucia. "I'm sure Foljambe will be as pleased as I am. You'll be going up to London, I suppose, constantly now till the end of this month, so that you can get your house or your flat, whichever it is, ready as soon as possible. How busy you and I will be, you settling into London and I into Tilling. Do you know, supposing you had thought of living permanently here, now that you've got rid of your house at Riseholme, I should have done my best

to persuade you not to, though I know in my selfishness that I did suggest that yesterday. But it would never do, Georgie. It's all very well for elderly women like me, who just want a little peace and quietness, or for retired men like Major Benjy or for dilettantes like Mr. Wyse, but for you, a thousand times no. I am sure of it."

Georgie got thoughtfuller and thoughtfuller. It had been rather a mistake to try to tease Lucia, for so far from being teased she was simply pleased. The longer she went on like this, and there seemed no end to her expressions of approval, the harder it would be to tell her.

"Do you really think that?" he said.

"Indeed I do. You would soon be terribly bored with Tilling. Oh, Georgie, I am so pleased with your good fortune and your good sense. I wonder if the agents here have got any houses or flats in London on their books. Let's go down there at once and see. We might find something. I'll run and put on my hat."

Georgie threw in his hand. As usual Lucia had come out on top.

"You're too tarsome," he said. "You don't believe a single word I've been telling you of my plans."

"My dear, of course I don't," said Lucia brightly. "I never heard such a pack of rubbish. Ananias is not in it. But it is true about selling your Riseholme house, I hope?"

"Yes, that part is," said Georgie.

"Then of course you're going to live here," said she. "I meant you to do that all along. Now how about Mallards Cottage? I saw that Yahoo in the High Street this morning, and she told me she wanted to let it for the winter. Let's go down to the agent's as I suggested, and see."

"I've done that already," said Georgie, "for I met her too, and she nearly knocked me down. I've got a five years' lease of it."

It was not in Lucia's nature to crow over anybody. She proved her quality and passed on to something else.

"Perfect!" she said. "It has all come out just as I planned, so that's all right. Now, if you've got nothing to do, let us have some music."

She got out the new Mozart which she had been practising.

"This looks a lovely duet," she said, "and we haven't tried it yet. I shall be terribly rusty, for all the time I had influenza, I hardly dared to play the piano at all."

Georgie looked at the new Mozart.

"It does look nice," he said. "Tum-ti-tum. Why, that's the one I heard you practising so busily yesterday morning."

Lucia took not the slightest notice of this.

"We begin together," she said, "on the third beat. Now . . . Uno, due, TRE!"