VIII

THE painting and decorating of Grebe began at once. Irene offered to do all the painting with her own hands, and recommended as a scheme for the music-room, a black ceiling and four walls of different colours, vermilion, emerald green, ultramarine and yellow. It would take a couple of months or so to execute, and the cost would be considerable as lapis lazuli must certainly be used for the ultramarine wall, but she assured Lucia that the result would be unique and marvellously stimulating to the eye, especially if she would add a magenta carpet and a nickel-plated mantelpiece.

"It sounds too lovely, dear," said Lucia, contemplating the sample of colours which Irene submitted to her, "but I feel sure I shan't be able to afford it. Such a pity! Those beautiful hues!"

Then Irene besought her to introduce a little variety into the shape of the windows. It would be amusing to have one window egg-shaped, and another triangular, and another with five or six or seven irregular sides, so that it looked as if it was a hole in the wall made by a shell. Or how about a front-door that, instead of opening sideways, let down like a portcullis?

Irene rose to more daring conceptions yet. One night she had dined on a pot of strawberry jam and half a pint of very potent cocktails, because she wanted her eye for colour to be at its keenest round about eleven o'clock when the moon would rise over the marsh, and she hoped to put the lid for ever on Whistler's naïve old-fashioned attempts to paint moonlight. After this salubrious meal she had come round to Mallards, waiting for the moon to rise and sat for half an hour at Lucia's piano, striking

random chords, and asking Lucia what colour they were. These musical rainbows suggested a wonderful idea, and she shut down the piano with a splendid purple bang.

"Darling, I've got a new scheme for Grebe," she said. "I want you to furnish a room sideways, if you understand what I mean."

"I don't think I do," said Lucia.

"Why, like this," said Irene very thoughtfully. "You would open the door of the room and find you were walking about on wallpaper with pictures hanging on it. (I'll do the pictures for you.) Then one side of the room where the window is would be whitewashed as if it was a ceiling and the window would be the skylight. The opposite side would be the floor; and you would have the furniture screwed on to it. The other walls, including the one which would be the ceiling in an ordinary room, would be covered with wallpaper and more pictures and a bookcase. It would all be sideways, you see: you'd enter through the wall, and the room would be at right angles to you; ceiling on the left, floor on the right, or vice versa. It would give you a perfectly new perception of the world. You would see everything from a new angle, which is what we want so much in life nowadays. Don't you think so?"

Irene's speech was distinct and clear cut, she walked up and down the garden-room with a firm unwavering step, and Lucia put from her the uneasy suspicion that her dinner had gone to her head.

"It would be most delightful," she said, "but slightly too experimental for me."

"And then, you see," continued Irene, "how useful it would be if somebody tipsy came in. It would make him sober at once, for tipsy people see everything crooked, and so your sideways-room, being crooked, would appear to him straight, and so he would be himself again. Just like that."

"That would be splendid," said Lucia, "but I can't

provide a room where tipsy people could feel sober again. The house isn't big enough."

Irene sat down by her, and passionately clasped one of her hands.

"Lucia, you're too adorable," she said. "Nothing defeats you. I've been talking the most abject nonsense, though I do think that there may be something in it, and you remain as calm as the moon which I hope will rise over the marsh before long, unless the almanack in which I looked it out is last year's. Don't tell anybody else about the sideways-room, will you, or they might think I was drunk. Let it be our secret, darling."

Lucia wondered for a moment if she ought to allow Irene to spend the night on the marsh, but she was perfectly capable of coherent speech and controlled movements, and possibly the open air might do her good.

"Not a soul shall know, dear," she said. "And now if you're really going to paint the moon, you had better start. You feel quite sure you can manage it, don't you?"

"Of course I can manage the moon," said Irene stoutly. "I've managed it lots of times. I wish you would come with me. I always hate leaving you. Or shall I stop here, and paint you instead? Or do you think Georgie would come? What a lamb, isn't he? Pass the mint-sauce please, or shall I go home?"

"Perhaps that would be best," said Lucia. "Paint the moon another night."

Lucia next day hurried up the firm to which she had entrusted the decoration of Grebe, in case Irene had some new schemes, and half-way through November, the house was ready to receive her furniture from Riseholme. Georgie simultaneously was settling into Mallards Cottage, and in the course of it went through a crisis of the most agitating kind. Isabel had assured him that by noon on a certain day men would arrive to take her furniture to the repository where it was to be stored, and as the vans with his effects from Riseholme

had arrived in Tilling the night before, he induced the foreman to begin moving everything out of the house at nine next morning and bring his furniture in. This was done, and by noon all Isabel's tables and chairs and beds and crockery were standing out in the street ready for her van. They completely blocked it for wheeled traffic, though pedestrians could manage to squeeze by in single file. Tilling did not mind this little inconvenience in the least, for it was all so interesting, and tradesmen's carts coming down the street were cheerfully backed into the churchyard again and turned round in order to make a more circuitous route, and those coming up were equally obliging, while foot-passengers, thrilled with having the entire contents of a house exposed for their inspection, were unable to tear themselves away from so intimate an exhibition. Then Georgie's furniture was moved in, and there were dazzling and fascinating objects for inspection, pictures that he had painted, screens and bedspreads that he had worked, very pretty woollen pyjamas for the winter and embroidered covers for hot-water bottles. These millineries roused Major Benjy's manliest indignation, and he was nearly late for the tram to take him out to play golf, for he could not tear himself away from the revolting sight. In a few hours Georgie's effects had passed into the house, but still there was no sign of anyone coming to remove Isabel's from the street, and, by dint of telephoning, it was discovered that she had forgotten to give any order at all about them, and the men from the repository were out on other jobs. It then began to rain rather heavily, and though Georgie called heaven and earth to witness that all this muddle was not his fault he felt compelled, out of mere human compassion, to have Isabel's furniture moved back into his house again. In consequence the rooms and passages on the ground floor were completely blocked with stacks of cupboards and tables piled high with books and crockery and saucepans, the front door would not shut, and Foljambe, caught upstairs by the rising tide, could not come down. The climax of intensity

arrived when she let down a string from an upper window, and Georgie's cook attached a small basket of nourishing food to it. Diva was terribly late for lunch at the Wyses, for she was rooted to the spot, though it was raining heavily, till she was sure that Foljambe would not be starved.

But by the time that the month of November was over, the houses of the new-comers were ready to receive them, and a general post of owners back to their homes took place after a remunerative let of four months. Elizabeth returned to Mallards from Wasters, bringing with her, in addition to what she had taken there, a cargo of preserves made from Diva's garden of such bulk that Coglen had to make two journeys with her large wheelbarrow. Diva returned to Wasters from Taormina, quaint Irene came back to Taormina from the labourer's cottage with a hand-cart laden with striking canvases including that of the women wrestlers who had become men, and the labourer and his family were free to trek to their own abode from the hop-picker's shanty which they had inhabited so much longer than they had intended.

There followed several extremely busy days for most of the returning emigrants. Elizabeth in particular was occupied from morning till night in scrutinizing every corner of Mallards and making out a list of dilapidations against Lucia. There was a teacup missing, the men who removed Lucia's hired piano from the garden-room had scraped a large piece of paint off the wall, Lucia had forgotten to replace dearest mamma's piano which still stood in the telephone-room, and there was no sign of a certain egg-whisk. Simultaneously Diva was preparing a similar list for Elizabeth which would astonish her, but was pleased to find that the tenant had left an egg-whisk behind; while the wife of the labourer, not being instructed in dilapidations, was removing from the white-washed wall of her cottage the fresco which Irene had painted there in her spare moments. It wasn't fit to be seen, that it wasn't, but a scrubbing-brush and some hot water made short work of all those naked people. Irene, for her part, was

frantically searching among her canvases for a picture of Adam and Eve with quantities of the sons of God shouting for joy: an important work. Perhaps she had left it at the cottage, and then remembering that she had painted it on the wall, she hurried off there in order to varnish it against the inclemencies of weather. But it was already too late, for the last of the sons of God was even then disappearing under the strokes of the scrubbing-brush.

Gradually, though not at once, these claims and counter-claims were (with the exception of the fresco) adjusted to the general dissatisfaction. Lucia acknowledged the charge for the re-establishment of dearest mamma's piano in the garden-room, but her cook very distinctly remembered that on the day when Miss Mapp tried to bribe her to impart the secret of lobster *à la Riseholme*, she took away the egg-whisk, which had formed the gambit of Miss Mapp's vain attempt to corrupt her. So Lucia reminded Elizabeth that not very long ago she had called at the back door of Mallards and had taken it away herself. Her cook believed that it was in two if not three pieces. So Miss Mapp, having made certain it had not got put by mistake among the pots of preserves she had brought from Wasters, went to see if she had left it there, and found not it alone, but a preposterous list of claims against her from Diva. But by degrees these billows, which were of annual occurrence, subsided, and apart from Elizabeth's chronic grievance against Lucia for her hoarding the secret of the lobster, they and other differences in the past faded away and Tilling was at leisure to turn its attention again to the hardly more important problems and perplexities of life and the menaces that might have to be met in the future.

Elizabeth, on this morning of mid-December, was quite settled into Mallards again, egg-whisk and all, and the window of her garden-room was being once more used by the rightful owner for the purpose of taking observations. It had always been a highly strategic position; it commanded, for instance, a perfect view of the front door of

Taormina, which at the present moment quaint Irene was painting in stripes of salmon pink and azure. She had tried to reproduce the lost fresco on it, but there had been earnest remonstrances from the Padre, and also the panels on the door broke it up and made it an unsuitable surface for such a cartoon. She therefore was contenting herself with brightening it up. Then Elizabeth could see the mouth of Porpoise Street and register all the journeys of the Royce. These, after a fortnight's intermission, had become frequent again, for the Wyses had just come back from " visiting friends in Devonshire," and though Elizabeth had strong reason to suspect that friends in Devonshire denoted nothing more than an hotel in Torquay, they had certainly taken the Royce with them, and during its absence the streets of Tilling had been far more convenient for traffic. Then there was Major Benjy's house as before, under her very eye, and now Mallards Cottage as well was a point that demanded frequent scrutiny. She had never cared what that distraught Isabel Poppit did, but with Georgie there it was different, and neither Major Benjy nor he (nor anybody else visiting them) could go in or out of either house without instant detection. The two most important men in Tilling, in fact, were powerless to evade her observation.

Nothing particular was happening at the moment, and Elizabeth was making a mental retrospect rather as if she was the King preparing his speech for the opening of Parliament. Her relations with foreign powers were excellent, and though during the last six months there had been disquieting incidents, there was nothing immediately threatening. . . . Then round the corner of the High Street came Lucia's car and the King's speech was put aside.

The car stopped at Taormina. Quaint Irene instantly put down her painting paraphernalia on the pavement, and stood talking into the window of the car for quite a long time. Clearly therefore Lucia, though invisible, was inside it. Eventually Irene leaned her head forward into

the car, exactly as if she was kissing something, and stepping back again upset one of her paint-pots. This was pleasant, but not of first-rate importance compared with what the car would do next. It turned down into Porpoise Street: naturally there was no telling for certain what happened to it there, for it was out of sight, but a tyro could conjecture that it had business at the Wyses, even if he had been so deaf as not to hear the clanging of that front-door bell. Then it came backing out again, went through the usual manœuvres of turning, and next stopped at Major Benjy's. Lucia was still invisible, but Cadman got down and delivered a note. The tyro could therefore conjecture by this time that invitations were coming from Grebe.

She slid her chair a little farther back behind the curtain, feeling sure that the car would stop next at her own door. But it turned the corner below the window without drawing up, and Elizabeth got a fleeting glance into the interior, where Lucia was sitting with a large book open in her lap. Next it stopped at Mallards Cottage: no note was delivered there, but Cadman rang the bell, and presently Georgie came out. Like Irene, he talked for quite a long time into the window of the car, but, unlike her, did not kiss anything at the conclusion of the interview. The situation was therefore perfectly clear: Lucia had asked Irene and Major Benjy and Georgie and probably the Wyses to some entertainment, no doubt the house-warming of which there had been rumours, but had not asked her. Very well. The relations with foreign powers therefore had suddenly become far from satisfactory.

Elizabeth quitted her seat in the window, for she had observed enough to supply her with plenty of food for thought, and went back, in perfect self-control, to the inspection of her household books; adding up figures was a purely mechanical matter, which allowed the intenser emotions full play. Georgie would be coming in here presently, for he was painting a sketch of the interior of the garden-room; this was to be his Christmas present

to Lucia (a surprise, about which she was to know nothing), to remind her of the happy days she had spent in it. He usually left his sketch here, for it was not worth while to take it backwards and forwards, and there it stood, propped up on the book-case. He had first tried an Irene-ish technique, but he had been obliged to abandon that, since the garden-room with this handling persisted in looking like Paddington Station in a fog, and he had gone back to the style he knew, in which book-cases, chairs and curtains were easily recognizable. It needed a few mornings' work yet, and now the idea of destroying it, and, when he arrived, of telling him that she was quite sure he had taken it back with him yesterday darted unbidden into Elizabeth's mind. But she rejected it, though it would have been pleasant to deprive Lucia of her Christmas present . . . and she did not believe for a moment that she had ordered a dozen eggs on Tuesday and a dozen more on Thursday. The butcher's bill seemed to be correct, though extortionate, and she must find out as soon as possible whether the Padre and his wife and Diva were asked to Grebe too. If they were—but she banished the thought of what was to be done if they were: it was difficult enough to know what to do even if they weren't.

The books were quickly done, and Elizabeth went back to finish reading the morning paper in the window. Just as she got there Georgie, with his little cape over his shoulders and his paint-box in his hand, came stepping briskly along from Mallards Cottage. Simultaneously Lucia's great bumping car returned round the corner by the churchyard, in the direction of Mallards.

An inspiration of purest ray serene seized Elizabeth. She waited till Georgie had rung the front-door bell, at which psychological moment Lucia's car was straight below the window. Without a second's hesitation Elizabeth threw up the sash, and, without appearing to see Lucia at all, called out to Georgie in a high cheerful voice, using baby-language.

"Oo is very naughty boy, Georgie!" she cried. "Never

ring Elizabeth's belly-pelly. Oo walk straight in always, and sing out for her. There's no chain up."

Georgie looked round in amazement. Never had Elizabeth called him Georgie before, or talked to him in the language consecrated for his use and Lucia's. And there was Lucia's car close to him. She must have heard this affectionate welcome, and what would she think? But there was nothing to do but to go in.

Still without seeing (far less cutting) Lucia, Elizabeth closed the window again, positively dazzled by her own brilliance. An hour's concentrated thought could not have suggested to her anything that Lucia would dislike more thoroughly than hearing that gay little speech, which parodied her and revealed such playful intimacy with Georgie. Georgie came straight out to the garden-room, saying "Elizabeth, Elizabeth" to himself below his breath, in order to get used to it, for he must return this token of friendship in kind.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," he said firmly (and the worst was over until such time as he had to say it again in Lucia's presence).

"Good morning, Georgie," she said by way of confirmation. "What a lovely light for your painting this morning. Here it is ready for you, and Withers will bring you out your glass of water. How you've caught the feel of my dear little room!"

Another glance out of the window as she brought him his sketch was necessary, and she gasped. There was Cadman on the doorstep just handing Withers a note. In another minute she came into the garden-room.

"From Mrs. Lucas," she said. "She forgot to leave it when she went by before."

"That's about the house-warming, I'm sure," said Georgie, getting his paint-box ready.

What was done, was done, and there was no use in thinking about that. Elizabeth tore the note open.

"A house-warming?" she said. "Dear Lucia! What a treat that will be. Yes, you're quite right."

"She's sending her car up for the Padre and his wife and Irene and Mrs. Plaistow," said Georgie, "and asked me just now if I would bring you and Major Benjy. Naturally I will."

Elizabeth's brilliant speech out of the window had assumed the aspect of a gratuitous act of war. But she could not have guessed that Lucia had merely forgotten to leave her invitation. The most charitable would have assumed that there was no invitation to leave.

"How kind of you!" she said. "To-morrow night, isn't it? Rather short notice. I must see if I'm disengaged."

As Lucia had asked the whole of the élite of Tilling, this proved to be the case. But Elizabeth still pondered as to whether she should accept or not. She had committed one unfriendly act in talking baby-language to Georgie, with a pointed allusion to the door-chain, literally over Lucia's head, and it was a question whether, having done that, it would not be wise to commit another (while Lucia, it might be guessed, was still staggering) by refusing to go to the house-warming. She did not doubt that there would be war before long: the only question was if she was ready now.

As she was pondering Withers came in to say that Major Benjy had called. He would not come out into the garden room, but he would like to speak to her a minute.

"Evidently he has heard that Georgie is here," thought Elizabeth to herself as she hurried into the house. "Dear me, how men quarrel with each other, and I only want to be on good terms with everybody. No doubt he wants to know if I'm going to the house-warming.—Good morning, Major Benjy."

"Thought I wouldn't come out," said this bluff fellow, "as I heard your Miss Milliner Michael-Angelo, ha, was with you——"

"Oh Major Benjy, fie!" said Elizabeth. "Cruel of you."

"Well, leave it at that. Now about this party to-morrow. I think I shall make a stand straight away, for

I'm not going to spend the whole of the winter evenings tramping through the mud to Grebe. To be sure it's dinner this time, which makes a difference."

Elizabeth found that she longed to see what Lucia had made of Grebe, and what she had made of her speech from the window.

"I quite agree in principle," she said, "but a house-warming, you know. Perhaps it wouldn't be kind to refuse. Besides, Georgie——"

"Eh?" said the Major.

"Mr. Pillson, I mean," said Elizabeth, hastily correcting herself, "has offered to drive us both down."

"And back?" asked he suspiciously.

"Of course. So just for once, shall we?"

"Very good. But none of those after-dinner musicals, or lessons in bridge for me."

"Oh, Major Benjy!" said Elizabeth. "How can you talk so? As if poor Lucia would attempt to teach *you* bridge."

This could be taken in two ways, one interpretation would read that he was incapable of learning, the other that Lucia was incapable of teaching. He took the more obvious one.

"Upon my soul she did, at the last game I had with her," said he. "Laid out the last three tricks and told me how to play them. Beyond a joke. Well, I won't keep you from your dressmaker."

"O fie!" said Elizabeth again. "Au reservoir."

Lucia, meantime, had driven back to Grebe with that mocking voice still ringing in her ears, and a series of most unpleasant images, like some diabolical film, displaying themselves before her inward eye. Most probably Elizabeth had seen her when she called out to Georgie like that, and was intentionally insulting her. Such conduct called for immediate reprisals and she must presently begin to think these out. But the alternative, possible though not probable, that Elizabeth had not seen her, was infinitely

more wounding, for it implied that Georgie was guilty of treacheries too black to bear looking at. Privately, when she herself was not present, he was on Christian-name terms with that woman, and permitted and enjoyed her obvious mimicry of herself. And what was Georgie doing popping in to Mallards like this, and being scolded in baby-voice for ringing the bell instead of letting himself in, with allusions of an absolutely unmistakable kind to that episode about the chain? Did they laugh over that together: did Georgie poke fun at his oldest friend behind her back? Lucia positively writhed at the thought. In any case, whether or no he was guilty of this monstrous infidelity, he must be in the habit of going into Mallards, and now she remembered that he had his paint-box in his hand. Clearly then he was going there to paint, and in all their talks when he so constantly told her what he had been doing, he had never breathed a word of that. Perhaps he was painting Elizabeth, for in this winter weather he could never be painting in the garden. Just now too, when she called at Mallards Cottage, and they had had a talk together, he had refused to go out and drive with her, because he had some little jobs to do indoors, and the moment he had got rid of her,—no less than that—he had hurried off to Mallards with his paint-box. With all this evidence, things looked very dark indeed, and the worst and most wounding of these two alternatives began to assume probability.

Georgie was coming to tea with her that afternoon, and she must find out what the truth of the matter was. But she could not imagine herself saying to him: "Does she really call you Georgie, and does she imitate me behind my back, and are you painting her?" Pride absolutely forbade that: such humiliating inquiries would choke her. Should she show him an icy aloof demeanour, until he asked her if anything was the matter? But that wouldn't do, for either she must say that nothing was the matter, which would not help, or she must tell him what the matter was, which was impossible. She must behave to him

exactly as usual, and he would probably do the same. "So how am I to find out?" said the bewildered Lucia quite aloud.

Another extremely uncomfortable person in tranquil Tilling that morning was Georgie himself. As he painted this sketch of the garden-room for Lucia, with Elizabeth busying herself with dusting her piano and bringing in chrysanthemums from her greenhouse, and making bright little sarcasms about Diva who was in ill odour just now, there painted itself in his mind, in colours growing ever more vivid, a most ominous picture of Lucia. If he knew her at all, and he was sure he did, she would say nothing whatever about that disconcerting scene on the doorstep. Awkward as it would be, he would be obliged to protest his innocence, and denounce Elizabeth. Most disagreeable, and who could foresee the consequences? For Lucia (if he knew her) would see red, and there would be war. Bloody war of the most devastating sort. "But it will be rather exciting too," thought he, "and I back Lucia."

Georgie could not wait for tea-time, but set forth on his uncomfortable errand soon after lunch. Lucia had seen him coming up the garden, and abandoned her musings and sat down hastily at the piano. Instantly on his entry she sprang up again, and plunged into mixed Italian and baby-talk.

"Ben arrivato, Georgino," she cried. "How early you are, and so we can have cosy ickle chat-chat before tea. Any newsy-pewsy?"

Georgie took the plunge.

"Yes," he said.

"Tell Lucia, presto. Oo think me like it?"

"It'll interest you," said Georgie guardedly. "Now! When I was standing on Mallards doorstep this morning, did you hear what that old witch called to me out of the garden-room window?"

Lucia could not repress a sigh of relief. The worst could not be true. Then she became herself again.

"Let me see now!" she said. "Yes. I think I did.

She called you Georgie, didn't she: she scolded you for ringing. Something of that sort."

"Yes. And she talked baby-talk like you and me," interrupted Georgie, "and she said the door wasn't on the chain. I want to tell you straight off that she never called me Georgie before, and that we've never talked baby-talk together in my life. I owe it to myself to tell you that."

Lucia turned her piercing eye on to Georgie. There seemed to be a sparkle in it that boded ill for somebody.

"And you think she saw me, Georgie?" she asked.

"Of course she did. Your car was directly below her window."

"I am afraid there is no doubt about it," said Lucia. "Her remarks, therefore, seem to have been directed at me. A singularly ill-bred person. There's one thing more. You were taking your paint-box with you——"

"Oh, that's all right," said he. "I'm doing a sketch of the garden-room. You'll know about that in time. And what are you going to do?" he asked greedily.

Lucia laughed in her most musical manner.

"Well, first of all I shall give her a very good dinner to-morrow, as she has not had the decency to say she was engaged. She telephoned to me just now telling me what a joy it would be, and how she was looking forward to it. And mind you call her Elizabeth."

"I've done that already," said Georgie proudly. "I practised saying it to myself."

"Good. She dines here then to-morrow night, and I shall be her hostess and shall make the evening as pleasant as I can to all my guests. But apart from that, Georgie, I shall take steps to teach her manners if she's not too old to learn. She will be sorry; she will wish she had not been so rude. And I can't see any objection to our other friends in Tilling knowing what occurred this morning, if you feel inclined to speak of it. I shan't, but there's no reason why you shouldn't."

"Hurrah, I'm dining with the Wyses to-night," said Georgie. "They'll soon know."

Lucia knitted her brows in profound thought.

"And then there's that incident about our pictures, yours and mine, being rejected by the hanging committee of the Art Club," said she, "We have both kept the forms we received saying that they regretted having to return them, and I think, Georgie, that while you are on the subject of Elizabeth Mapp, you might show yours to Mr. Wyse. He is a member, so is Susan, of the committee, and I think they have a right to know that our pictures were rejected on official forms without ever coming before the committee at all. I behaved towards our poor friend with a magnanimity that now appears to me excessive, and since she does not appreciate magnanimity we will try her with something else. That would not be amiss." Lucia rose.

"And now let us leave this very disagreeable subject for the present," she said, "and take the taste of it out of our mouths with a little music. Beethoven, noble Beethoven, don't you think? The fifth symphony, Georgie, for four hands. Fate knocking at the door."

Georgie rather thought that Lucia smacked her lips as she said, "this very disagreeable subject," but he was not certain, and presently Fate was knocking at the door with Lucia's firm fingers, for she took the treble.

They had a nice long practice, and when it was time to go home Lucia detained him.

"I've got one thing to say to you, Georgie," she said, "though not about that paltry subject. I've sold the Hurst, I've bought this new property, and so I've made a new will. I've left Grebe and all it contains to you, and also, well, a little sum of money. I should like you to know that."

Georgie was much touched.

"My dear, how wonderful of you," he said. "But I hope it will be ages and ages before——"

"So do I, Georgie," she said in her most sincere manner.

Tilling had known tensions before and would doubtless know them again. Often it had been on a very agreeable rack of suspense, as when, for instance, it had believed (or striven to believe) that Major Benjy might be fighting a duel with that old crony of his, Captain Puffin, lately deceased. Now there was a suspense of a more intimate quality (for nobody would have cared at all if Captain Puffin had been killed, nor much, if Major Benjy), for it was as if the innermost social guts of Tilling were attached to some relentless windlass, which, at any moment now, might be wound, but not relaxed. The High Street next morning, therefore, was the scene of almost painful excitement. The Wyses' Royce, with Susan smothered in sables, went up and down, until she was practically certain that she had told everybody that she and Algernon had retired from the hanging committee of the Arts' Club, pending explanations which they had requested Miss (no longer Elizabeth) Mapp to furnish, but which they had no hope of receiving. Susan was perfectly explicit about the cause of this step, and Algernon who, at a very early hour, had interviewed the errand-boy at the frame-shop, was by her side, to corroborate all she said. His high-bred reticence, indeed, had been even more weighty than Susan's volubility. "I am afraid it is all too true," was all that could be got out of him. Two hours had now elapsed since their resignations had been sent in, and still no reply had come from Mallards.

But that situation was but an insignificant fraction of the prevalent suspense, for the exhibition had been open and closed months before, and if Tilling was to make a practice of listening to such posthumous revelations, life would cease to have any poignant interest, but be wholly occupied in retrospective retributions. Thrilling therefore as was the past, as revealed by the stern occupants of the Royce, what had happened only yesterday on the doorstep of Mallards was far more engrossing. The story of that, by 11.30 a.m., already contained several remarkable variants. The Padre affirmed that Georgie had essayed

to enter Mallards without knocking, and that Miss Mapp (the tendency to call her Miss Mapp was spreading) had seen Lucia in her motor just below the window of the garden-room, and had called out " Tum in, Georgino mio, no tarsome chains now that Elizabeth has got back to her own housie-pousie." Diva had reason to believe that Elizabeth (she still stuck to that) had not seen Lucia in her motor, and had called out of the window to Georgie " Ring the belly-pelly, dear, for I'm afraid the chain is on the door." Mrs. Bartlett (she was no use at all) said, " All so distressing and exciting and Christmas Day next week, and very little goodwill, oh dear me ! " Irene had said, " That old witch will get what for."

Again, it was known that Major Benjy had called at Mallards soon after the scene, whatever it was, had taken place, and had refused to go into the garden-room, when he heard that Georgie was painting Elizabeth's portrait. Withers was witness (she had brought several pots of jam to Diva's house that morning, not vegetable marrow at all, but raspberry, which looked like a bribe) that the Major had said " Faugh ! " when she told him that Georgie was there. Major Benjy himself could not be cross-examined because he had gone out by the eleven o'clock tram to play golf. Lucia had not been seen in the High Street at all, nor had Miss Mapp, and Georgie had only passed through it in his car, quite early, going in the direction of Grebe. This absence of the principals, in these earlier stages of development, was felt to be in accordance with the highest rules of dramatic technique, and everybody, as far as was known, was to meet that very night at Lucia's house-warming. Opinion as to what would happen then was as divergent as the rumours of what had happened already. Some said that Miss Mapp had declined the invitation on the plea that she was engaged to dine with Major Benjy. This was unlikely, because he never had anybody to dinner. Some said that she had accepted, and that Lucia no doubt intended to send out a message that she was not expected, but that Georgie's car would

take her home again. So sorry. All this, however, was a matter of pure conjecture, and it was work enough to sift out what had happened, without wasting time (for time was precious) in guessing what would happen.

The church clock had hardly struck half-past eleven (winter time) before the first of the principals appeared on the stage of the High Street. This was Miss Mapp, wreathed in smiles, and occupied in her usual shopping errands. She trotted about from grocer to butcher, and butcher to general stores, where she bought a mouse-trap, and was exceedingly affable to tradespeople. She nodded to her friends, she patted Mr. Woolgar's dog on the head, she gave a penny to a ragged individual with a lugubrious baritone voice who was singing 'The Last Rose of Summer,' and said "Thank you for your sweet music." Then after pausing for a moment on the pavement in front of Wasters, she rang the bell. Diva, who had seen her from the window, flew to open it.

"Good morning, Diva dear," she said. "I just looked in. Any news?"

"Good gracious, it's I who ought to ask you that," said Diva. "What *did* happen really?"

Elizabeth looked very much surprised.

"How? When? Where?" she asked.

"As if you didn't know," said Diva, fizzing with impatience. "Mr. Georgie, Lucia, paint-boxes, no chain on the door, you at the garden-room window, belly-pelly. Etcetera. Yesterday morning."

Elizabeth put her finger to her forehead, as if trying to recall some dim impression. She appeared to succeed.

"Dear gossipy one," she said, "I believe I know what you mean. Georgie came to paint in the garden-room, as he so often does——"

"Do you call him Georgie?" asked Diva in an eager parenthesis.

"Yes, I fancy that's his name, and he calls me Elizabeth."

"No!" said Diva.

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "Do not interrupt me, dear. . . . I happened to be at the window as he rang the bell, and I just popped my head out, and told him he was a naughty boy not to walk straight in."

"In baby-talk?" asked Diva. "Like Lucia?"

"Like any baby you chance to mention," said Elizabeth. "Why not?"

"But with her sitting in her car just below?"

"Yes, dear, it so happened that she was just coming to leave an invitation on me for her house-warming to-night. Are you going?"

"Yes, of course, everybody is. But how could you do it?"

Elizabeth sat wrapped in thought.

"I'm beginning to see what you mean," she said at length. "But what an absurd notion. You mean, don't you, that dear Lulu thinks—goodness, how ridiculous—that I was mimicking her."

"Nobody knows what she thinks," said Diva. "She's not been seen this morning."

"But gracious goodness me, what have I done?" asked Elizabeth. "Why this excitement? Is there a law that only Mrs. Lucas of Grebe may call Georgie, Georgie? So ignorant of me if there is. Ought I to call him Frederick? And pray, why shouldn't I talk baby-talk? Another law perhaps. I must get a book of the laws of England."

"But you knew she was in the car just below you and must have heard."

Elizabeth was now in possession of what she wanted to know. Diva was quite a decent barometer of Tilling weather, and the weather was stormy.

"Rubbish, darling," she said. "You are making mountains out of mole-hills. If Lulu heard—and I don't know that she did, mind—what cause of complaint has she? Mayn't I say Georgie? Mayn't I say 'vewy naughty boy'? Let us hear no more about it. You will see this evening how wrong you all are. Lulu will be just

as sweet and cordial as ever. And you will hear with your own ears how Georgie calls me Elizabeth."

These were brave words, and they very fitly represented the stout heart that inspired them. Tilling had taken her conduct to be equivalent to an act of war, exactly as she had meant it to be, and if anyone thought that E. M. was afraid they were wrong. . . . Then there was that matter of Mr. Wyse's letter, resigning from the hanging committee. She must tap the barometer again.

"I think everybody is a shade mad this morning," she observed, "and I should call Mr. Wyse, if anybody asked me to be candid, a raving lunatic. There was a little misunderstanding months and months ago—I am vague about it—concerning two pictures that Lulu and Georgie sent in to the Art Exhibition in the summer. I thought it was all settled and done with. But I did act a little irregularly. Technically I was wrong, and when I have been wrong about a thing, as you very well know, dear Diva, I am not ashamed to confess it."

"Of course you were wrong," said Diva cordially, "if Mr. Wyse's account of it is correct. You sent the pictures back, such beauties, too, with a formal rejection from the hanging committee when they had never seen them at all. So rash, too: I wonder at you."

These unfavourable comments did not make the transaction appear any the less irregular.

"I said I was wrong, Diva," remarked Elizabeth with some asperity, "and I should have thought that was enough. And now Mr. Wyse, raking bygones up again in the way he has, has written to me to say that he and Susan resign their places on the hanging committee."

"I know: they told everybody," said Diva. "Awkward. What are you going to do?"

The barometer had jerked alarmingly downwards on this renewed tapping.

"I shall cry peccavi," said Elizabeth, with the air of doing something exceedingly noble. "I shall myself resign. That will show that whatever anybody else does,

I am doing the best in my power to put right a technical error. I hope Mr. Wyse will appreciate that, and be ashamed of the letter he wrote me. More than that, I shall regard his letter as having been written in a fit of temporary insanity, which I trust will not recur."

"Yes; I suppose that's the best thing you can do," said Diva. "It will show him that you regret what you did, now that it's all found out."

"That is not generous of you, Diva," cried Elizabeth, "I am sorry you said that."

"More than I am," said Diva. "It's a very fair statement. Isn't it now? What's wrong with it?"

Elizabeth suddenly perceived that at this crisis it was unwise to indulge in her usual tiffs with Diva. She wanted allies.

"Diva, dear, we mustn't quarrel," she said. "That would never do. I felt I had to pop in to consult you as to the right course to take with Mr. Wyse, and I'm so glad you agree with me. How I trust your judgment! I must be going. What a delightful evening we have in store for us. Major Benjy was thinking of declining, but I persuaded him it would not be kind. A house-warming, you know. Such a special occasion."

The evening to which everybody had looked forward so much was, in the main, a disappointment to bellicose spirits. Nothing could exceed Lucia's cordiality to Elizabeth unless it was Elizabeth's to Lucia: they left the dining-room at the end of dinner with arms and waists intertwined, a very bitter sight. They then played bridge at the same table, and so loaded each other with compliments while deploring their own errors, that Diva began to entertain the most serious fears that they had been mean enough to make it up on the sly, or that Lucia in a spirit of Christian forbearance, positively unnatural, had decided to overlook all the attacks and insults with which Elizabeth had tried to provoke her. Or did Lucia think that this degrading display of magnanimity was a weapon by which she would secure victory, by enlisting for her the sympathy

and applause of Tilling? If so, that was a great mistake; Tilling did not want to witness a demonstration of forgiveness or white feathers but a combat without quarter. Again, if she thought that such nobility would soften the malevolent heart of Mapp, she showed a distressing ignorance of Mapp's nature, for she would quite properly construe this as not being nobility at all but the most ignoble cowardice. There was Georgie, under Lucia's very nose, interlarding his conversation with far more "Elizabeths" than was in the least necessary to show that he was talking to her, and she volleyed "Georgies" at him in return. Every now and then, when these discharges of Christian names had been particularly resonant, Elizabeth caught Diva's eye with a glance of triumph as if to remind her that she had prophesied that Lulu would be all sweetness and cordiality, and Diva turned away sick at heart.

On the other hand, there were still grounds for hope, and, as the evening went on, these became more promising: they were like small caps of foam and catspaws of wind upon a tranquil sea. To begin with, it was only this morning that the baseness of Elizabeth in that matter concerning the Art Committee had come to light. Georgie, not Lucia, had been directly responsible for that damning disclosure, but it must be supposed that he had acted with her connivance, if not with her express wish, and this certainly did not look so much like forgiveness as a nasty one for Elizabeth. That was hopeful, and Diva's eagle eye espied other signs of bad weather. Elizabeth, encouraged by Lucia's compliments and humilities throughout a long rubber, began to come out more in her true colours, and to explain to her partner that she had lost a few tricks (no matter) by not taking a finesse, or a whole game by not supporting her declaration, and Diva thought she detected a certain dangerous glitter in Lucia's eye as she bent to these chastisements. Surely, too, she bit her lip when Elizabeth suddenly began to call her Lulu again. Then there was Irene's conduct to consider: Irene was

fizzing and fidgeting in her chair, she cast glances of black hatred at Elizabeth, and once Diva distinctly saw Lucia frown and shake her head at her. Again, at the voluptuous supper which succeeded many rubbers of bridge, there was the famous lobster *à la Riseholme*. It had become, as all Tilling knew, a positive obsession with Elizabeth to get the secret of that delicious dish, and now, flushed with continuous victories at bridge and with Lucia's persevering pleasantness, she made another direct request for it.

"Lulu dear," she said, "it would be sweet of you to give me the recipe of your lobster. So good. . . ."

Diva felt this to be a crucial moment: Lucia had often refused it before, but now if she was wholly Christian and cowardly she would consent. But once more she gave no reply, and asked the Padre on what day of the week Christmas fell. So Diva heaved a sigh of relief, for there was still hope.

In spite of this rebuff, it was hardly to be wondered at that Elizabeth felt in a high state of elation when the evening was over. The returning revellers changed the order of their going, and Georgie took back her and Diva. He went outside with Dicky, for, during the last half-hour, Mapp (as he now mentally termed her in order to be done with Elizabeth) had grown like a mushroom in complaisance and self-confidence, and he could not trust himself, if she went on, as she would no doubt do, in the same strain, not to rap out something very sharp. "Let her just wait," he thought, "she'll soon be singing a different tune."

Georgie's precautions in going outside, well wrapped up in his cap and his fur tippet and his fur rug were well founded, for hardly had Mapp kissed her hand for the last time to Lulu (who would come to the door to see them off), and counted over the money she had won, than she burst into staves of intolerable triumph and condescension.

"So that's that!" she said, pulling up the window. "And if I was to ask you, dear Diva, which of us was right about how this evening would go off, I don't think there

would be very much doubt about the answer. Did you ever see Lulu so terribly anxious to please me? And did you happen to hear me say Georgie and him say Elizabeth? Lulu didn't like it, I am sure, but she had to swallow her medicine, and she did so with a very good grace, I am bound to say. She just wanted a little lesson, and I think I may say I've given it her. I had no idea, I will confess, that she would take it lying down like that. I just had to lean out of the window, pretend not to see her, and talk to Georgie in that silly voice and language and the thing was done."

Diva had been talking simultaneously for some time, but Elizabeth only paused to take breath, and went on in a slightly louder tone. So Diva talked louder too, until Georgie turned round to see what was happening. They both broke off, and smiled at him, and then both began again.

"If you would allow me to get a word in edgeways," said Diva, who had some solid arguments to produce, and, had she not been a lady, could have slapped Mapp's face in impotent rage——

"I don't think," said Elizabeth, "that we shall have much more trouble with her and her queenly airs. Quite a pleasant house-warming, and there was no doubt that the house wanted it, for it was bitterly cold in the dining-room, and I strongly suspect that chicken-cream of being rabbit. She only had to be shown that whatever Riseholme may have stood from her in the way of condescensions and graces, she had better not try them on at Tilling. She was looking forward to teaching us, and ruling us and guiding us. Pop! Elizabeth (that's me, dear!) has a little lamb, which lives at Grebe and gives a house-warming, so you may guess who *that* is. The way she flattered and sued to-night over our cards when but a few weeks ago she was thinking of holding bridge-classes——"

"You were just as bad," shouted Diva. "You told her she played beauti——"

"She was 'all over me,' to use that dreadful slang

expression of Major Benjy's," continued Mapp. "She was like a dog that has had a scolding and begs—so prettily—to be forgiven. Mind, dear, I do not say that she is a bad sort of woman by any means, but she required to be put in her place, and Tilling ought to thank me for having done so. Dear me, here we are already at your house. How short the drive has seemed!"

"Anyhow, you didn't get the recipe for the lobster *à la Riseholme*," said Diva, for this was one of the things she most wanted to say.

"A little final wriggle," said Mapp. "I have not the least doubt that she will think it over and send it me to-morrow. Good-night, darling. I shall be sending out invitations for a cosy evening at bridge some time at the end of this week."

The baffled Diva let herself into Wasters in low spirits, so convinced and lucid had been Mapp's comments on the evening. It was such a dismal conclusion to so much excitement; and all that thrilling tension, instead of snapping, had relaxed into the most depressing slackness. But she did not quite give up hope, for there had been catspaws and caps of foam on the tranquil sea. She fell asleep visualizing these.