IX

THOUGH Georgie had thought that the garden-room would have to give him at least two more sittings before his sketch arrived at that high state of finish which he, like the pre-Raphaelites, regarded as necessary to any work of art, he decided that he would leave it in a more impressionist state, and sent it next morning to be framed. In consequence the glass of water which Elizabeth had brought out for him in anticipation of his now usual visit at eleven o'clock remained unsullied by washings from his brush, and at twelve, Elizabeth, being rather thirsty in consequence of so late a supper the night before, drank it herself. On the second morning, a very wet one, Major Benjy did not go out for his usual round of golf, and again Georgie did not come to paint. But at a few minutes to one she observed that his car was at the door of Mallards Cottage; it passed her window, it stopped at Major Benjy's, and he got in. It was impossible not to remember that Lucia always lunched at one in the winter because a later hour for *colazione* made the afternoon so short. But it was a surprise to see Major Benjy driving away with Miss Milliner Michael-Angelo, and difficult to conjecture where else it was at all likely that they could have gone.

There was half an hour yet to her own luncheon, and she wrote seven post cards inviting seven friends to tea on Saturday, with bridge to follow. The Wyses, the Padres, Diva, Major Benjy and Georgie were the *destinataires* of these missives; these, with herself, made eight, and there would thus be two tables of agreeable gamblers. Lucia was not to be favoured: it would be salutary for her to be left out every now and then, just

to impress upon her the lesson of which she had stood so sadly in need. She must learn to go to heel, to come when called, and to produce recipes when desired, which at present she had not done.

There had been several days of heavy rain, but early in the afternoon it cleared up, and Elizabeth set out for a brisk healthy walk. The field-paths would certainly make very miry going, for she saw from the end of the High Street that there was much water lying in the marsh, and she therefore kept to that excellent road, which, having passed Grebe, went nowhere particular. She was prepared to go in and thank Lucia for her lovely house-warming, in order to make sure whether Georgie and Major Benjy had gone to lunch with her, but no such humiliating need occurred, for there in front of the house was drawn up Georgie's motor-car, so (whether she liked it or not, and she didn't) *that* problem was solved. The house stood quite close to the road: a flagged pathway of half a dozen yards, flanked at the entrance-gate by thick hornbeam hedges on which the leaf still lingered, separated it from the road, and just as Elizabeth passed Georgie's car drawn up there, the front-door opened, and she saw Lucia and her two guests on the threshold. Major Benjy was laughing in that fat voice of his, and Georgie was giving forth his shrill little neighs like a colt with a half-cracked voice.

The temptation to know what they were laughing at was irresistible. Elizabeth moved a few steps on and, screened by the hornbeam hedge, held her breath.

Major Benjy gave another great haw-haw and spoke.

"'Pon my word, did she really?" he said. "Do it again, Mrs. Lucas. Never laughed so much in my life. Infernal impertinence!"

There was no mistaking the voice and the words that followed.

"Oo is vewy naughty boy, Georgie," said Lucia. "Never ring Elizabeth's belly-pelly——"

Elizabeth hurried on, as she heard steps coming down

that short flagged pathway. But hurry as she might, she heard a little more.

"Oo walk straight in always and sing out for her," continued the voice, repeating word for word the speech of which she had been so proud. "There's no chain up"—and then came loathsome parody—"now that Liblib has ritornata to Mallardino."

It was in a scared mood, as if she had heard or seen a ghost, that Elizabeth hastened along up the road that led nowhere in particular, before Lucia's guests could emerge from the gate. Luckily at the end of the kitchen-garden the hornbeam hedge turned at right angles, and behind this bastion she hid herself till she heard the motor move away in the direction of Tilling, the prey of the most agitated misgivings. Was it possible that her own speech, which she had thought had scarified Lucia's pride, was being turned into a mockery and a derision against herself? It seemed not only possible but probable. And how dare Mrs. Lucas invent and repeat as if spoken by herself that rubbish about ritornata and Mallardino? Never in her life had she said such a thing.

When the coast was clear, she took the road again, and walked quickly on away from Tilling. The tide was very high, for the river was swollen with rain, and the waters overbrimmed its channel and extended in a great lake up to the foot of the bank and dyke which bounded the road. Perturbed as she was, Miss Mapp could not help admiring that broad expanse of water, now lit by a gleam of sun, in front of which to the westward, the hill of Tilling rose dark against a sky already growing red with the winter sunset. She had just turned a corner in the road, and now she perceived that close ahead of her somebody else was admiring it too in a more practical manner, for there by the roadside within twenty yards of her sat quaint Irene, with her mouth full of paint-brushes and an easel set up in front of her. She had not seen Irene since the night of the house-warming, when

the quaint one had not been very cordial, and so, thinking she had walked far enough, she turned back. But Irene had quite evidently seen her, for she shaded her eyes for a moment against the glare, took some of the paint-brushes out of her mouth and called to her with words that seemed to have what might be termed a dangerous undertow.

"Hullo, Mapp," she said. "Been lunching with Lulu?"

"What a lovely sketch, dear," said Mapp. "No, just a brisk little walk. Not been lunching at Grebe to-day."

Irene laughed hoarsely.

"I didn't think it was very likely, but thought I would ask," she said. "Yes; I'm rather pleased with my sketch. A bloody look about the sunlight, isn't there, as if the Day of Judgment was coming. I'm going to send it to the winter exhibition of the Art Club."

"Dear girlie, what do you mean?" asked Mapp. "We don't have winter exhibitions."

"No, but we're going to," said girlie. "A new hanging committee, you see, full of pep and pop and vim. Haven't they asked you to send them something. . . . Of course the space at their disposal is very limited."

Mapp laughed, but not with any great exuberance. This undertow was tweaking at her disagreeably.

"That's news to me," she said. "Most enterprising of Mr. Wyse and dear Susan."

"Sweet Lulu's idea," said Irene. "As soon as you sent in your resignation, of course they asked her to be President."

"That is nice for her," said Mapp enthusiastically. "She will like that. I must get to work on some little picky to send them."

"There's that one you did from the church-tower when Lucia had influenza," said this awful Irene. "That would be nice. . . . Oh, I forgot. Stupid of me. It's by invitation: the committee are asking a few people

to send pickies. No doubt they'll beg you for one. Such a good plan. There won't be any mistakes in the future about rejecting what is sent in."

Mapp gave a gulp but rallied.

"I see. They'll be all Academicians together, and be hung on the line," said she unflinchingly.

"Yes. On the line or be put on easels," said Irene. "Curse the light! It's fading. I must pack up. Hold these brushes, will you?"

"And then we'll walk back home together, shall we? A cup of tea with me, dear?" asked Mapp, anxious to conciliate and to know more.

"I'm going into Lucia's, I'm afraid. Wyses tummin' to play bridgey and hold a committee meeting," said Irene.

"You are a cruel thing to imitate poor Lulu," said Mapp. "How well you've caught that silly baby-talk of hers. Just her voice. Bye-bye."

"Same to you," said Irene.

There was undoubtedly, thought Mapp, as she scudded swiftly homewards alone, a sort of mocking note about quaint Irene's conversation, which she did not relish. It was full of hints and awkward allusions; it bristled with hidden menace, and even her imitation of Lucia's baby-talk was not wholly satisfactory, for quaint Irene might be mimicking her imitation of Lucia, even as Lucia herself had done, and there was very little humour in that. Presently she passed the Wyses' Royce going to Grebe. She kissed her hand to a mound of sables inside, but it was too dark to see if the salute was returned. Her brisk afternoon's walk had not freshened her up; she was aware of a feeling of fatigue, of a vague depression and anxiety. And mixed with that was a hunger not only for tea but for more information. There seemed to be things going on of which she was sadly ignorant, and even when her ignorance was enlightened, they remained rather sad. But Diva (such a gossip) might know more about this winter exhibition, and she popped

in to Wasters. Diva was in, and begged her to wait for tea: she would be down in a few minutes.

It was a cosy little room, looking out on to the garden which had yielded her so many pots of excellent preserves during the summer, but dreadfully untidy, as Diva's house always was. There was a litter of papers on the table, notes half-thrust back into their envelopes, cross-word puzzles cut out from the *Evening Standard* and partially solved: there was her own post card to Diva sent off that morning and already delivered, and there was a sheet of paper with the stamp of Grebe upon it and Lucia's monogram, which seemed to force itself on Elizabeth's eye. The most cursory glance revealed that this was a request from the Art Committee that Mrs. Plaistow would do them the honour to send them a couple of her sketches for the forthcoming winter exhibition. All the time there came from Diva's bedroom, directly overhead, the sound of rhythmical steps or thumps, most difficult to explain. In a few minutes these ceased, and Diva's tread on the stairs gave Elizabeth sufficient warning to enable her to snatch up the first book that came to hand, and sink into a chair by the fire. She saw, with some feeling of apprehension similar to those which had haunted her all afternoon, that this was a copy of *An Ideal System of Callisthenics for those no longer Young*, of which she seemed to have heard. On the title-page was an inscription "Diva from Lucia," and in brackets, like a prescription, "Ten minutes at the exercises in Chapter I, twice a day for the present."

Diva entered very briskly. She was redder in the face than usual, and, so Elizabeth instantly noticed, lifted her feet very high as she walked, and held her head well back and her breast out like a fat little pigeon. This time there was to be no question about getting a word in edgeways, for she began to talk before the door was fully open.

"Glad to see you, Elizabeth," she said, "and I shall be very pleased to play bridge on Saturday. I've never

felt so well in my life, do you know, and I've only been doing them two days. Oh, I see you've got the book."

"I heard you stamping and thumping, dear," said Elizabeth. "Was that them?"

"Yes, twice a day, ten minutes each time. It clears the head, too. If you sit down to a cross-word puzzle afterwards you find you're much brighter than usual."

"Callisthenics *à la Lucia*?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes. Irené and Mrs. Bartlett and I all do them, and Mrs. Wyse is going to begin, but rather more gently. Hasn't Lucia told you about them?"

Here was another revelation of things happening. Elizabeth met it bravely.

"No. Dear Lulu knows my feelings about that sort of fad. A brisk walk such as I've had this afternoon is all I require. Such lovely lights of sunset and a very high tide. Quaint Irene was sketching on the road just beyond Grebe."

"Yes. She's going to send it in and three more for the winter exhibition. Oh, perhaps you haven't heard. There's to be an exhibition directly after Christmas."

"Such a good idea: I've been discussing it," said Elizabeth.

Diva's eye travelled swiftly and suspiciously to the table where this flattering request to her lay on the top of the litter. Elizabeth did not fail to catch the significance of this.

"Irene told me," she said hastily, "I must see if I can find time to do them something."

"Oh, then they have asked you," said Diva with a shade of disappointment in her voice. "They've asked me too——"

"No! Really?" said Elizabeth.

"—so of course I said yes, but I'm afraid I'm rather out of practice. Lucia is going to give an address on modern Art at the opening, and then we shall all go round and look at each other's pictures."

"What fun!" said Elizabeth cordially.

Tea had been brought in. There was a pot of greenish jam and Elizabeth loaded her buttered toast with it, and put it into her mouth. She gave a choking cry and washed it down with a gulp of tea.

"Anything wrong?" asked Diva.

"Yes, dear. I'm afraid it's fermenting," said Elizabeth, laying down the rest of her toast. "And I can't conceive what it's made of."

Diva looked at the pot.

"You ought to know," she said. "It's one of the pots you gave me. Labelled vegetable marrow. So sorry it's not eatable. By the way, talking of food, did Lucia send you the recipe for the lobster?"

Elizabeth smiled her sweetest.

"Dear Lucia," she said. "She's been so busy with art and callisthenics. She must have forgotten. I shall jog her memory."

The afternoon had been full of rather unpleasant surprises, thought Elizabeth to herself, as she went up to Mallards that evening. They were concerned with local activities, art and gymnastics, of which she had hitherto heard nothing, and they all seemed to show a common origin: there was a hidden hand directing them. This was disconcerting, especially since, only a few nights ago, she had felt so sure that that hand had been upraised to her, beseeching pardon. Now it rather looked as if that hand had spirited itself away and was very busy and energetic on its own account.

She paused on her doorstep. There was a light shining out through chinks behind the curtains in Mallards Cottage, and she thought it would be a good thing to pop in on Georgie and see if she could gather some further gleanings. She would make herself extremely pleasant: she would admire his needlework if he was at it, she would praise the beautiful specklessness of his room, for Georgie always appreciated any compliment to Foljambe, she would sing the praises of Lucia, though they blistered her tongue.

Foljambe admitted her. The door of the sitting-room was ajar, and as she put down her umbrella, she heard Georgie's voice talking to the telephone.

"Saturday, half-past four," he said. "I've just found a post card. Hasn't she asked you?"

Georgie, as Elizabeth had often observed, was deafer than he knew (which accounted for his not hearing all the wrong note she played in his duets with Lucia) and he had not heard her entry, though Foljambe spoke her name quite loud. He was listening with rapt attention to what was coming through and saying "My dear!" or "No!" at intervals. Now, however, he turned and saw her, and with a scared expression hung up the receiver.

"Dear me, I never heard you come in!" he said. "How nice! I was just going to tell Foljambe to bring up tea. Two cups, Foljambe."

"I'm interrupting you," said Elizabeth. "I can see you were just settling down to your sewing and a cosy bachelor evening."

"Not a bit," said Georgie. "Do have a chair near the fire."

It was not necessary to explain that she had already had tea with Diva, even if one mouthful of fermenting vegetable could properly be called tea, and she took the chair he pulled up for her.

"Such beautiful work," she said, looking at Georgie's tambour of *petit point*, which lay near by. "What eyes you must have to be able to do it."

"Yes, they're pretty good yet," said Georgie, slipping his spectacle-case into his pocket. "And I shall be delighted to come to tea and bridge on Saturday. Thanks so much. Just got your invitation."

Miss Mapp knew that already.

"That's charming," she said. "And how I envy you your Foljambe. Not a speck of dust anywhere. You could eat your tea off the floor, as they say."

Georgie noticed that she did not use his Christian

name. This confirmed his belief that the employment of it was reserved for Lucia's presence as an annoyance to her. Then the telephone-bell rang again.

"May I?" said Georgie.

He went across to it, rather nervous. It was as he thought: Lucia was at it again, explaining that somebody had cut her off. Listen as she might, Miss Mapp, from where she sat, could only hear a confused quacking noise. So to show how indifferent she was as to the conversation, she put her fingers close to her ears ready to stop them when Georgie turned round again, and listened hard to what he said.

"Yes . . . yes," said Georgie. "Thanks so much —lovely. I'll pick him up then, shall I? Quarter to eight, is it? Yes, her too. Yes, I've done them once to-day: not a bit giddy. . . . I can't stop now, Lucia. Miss Ma—Elizabeth's just come in for a cup of tea. . . . I'll tell her."

Elizabeth felt she understood all this; she was an adept at telephonic reconstruction. There was evidently another party at Grebe. "Him" and "Her" no doubt were Major Benjy and herself, whom Georgie would pick up as before. "Them" were exercises, and Georgie's promise to tell her clearly meant that he should convey an invitation. This was satisfactory: evidently Lucia was hoping to propitiate. Then Georgie turned round and saw Elizabeth smiling gaily at the fire with her hands over her ears. He moved into her field of vision and she uncorked herself.

"Finished?" she said. "Hope you did not cut it short because of me."

"Not at all," said Georgie, for she couldn't (unless she was pretending) have heard him say that he had done precisely that. "It was Lucia ringing up. She sends you her love."

"Sweet of her, such a pet," said Elizabeth, and waited for more about picking up and that invitation. But Lucia's love appeared to be all, and Georgie asked her

if she took sugar. She did, and tried if he in turn would take another sort of sugar, both for himself and Lucia.

"Such a lovely house-warming," she said, "and how we all enjoyed ourselves. Lucia seems to have time for everything, bridge, those lovely duets with you, Italian, Greek (though we haven't heard much about that lately), a winter art exhibition, and an address (how I shall look forward to it!) on modern art, callisthenics——"

"Oh, you ought to try those," said Georgie. "You stretch and stamp and feel ever so young afterwards. We're all doing them."

"And does she take classes as she threat—promised to do?" asked Elizabeth.

"She will when we've mastered the elements," said Georgie. "We shall march round the kitchen-garden at Grebe—cinder paths you know, so good in wet weather—keeping time, and then skip and flex and jerk. And if it's raining we shall do them in the kitchen. You can throw open those double doors, and have plenty of fresh air which is so important. There's that enormous kitchen table too, to hold on to, when we're doing that swimming movement. It's like a great raft."

Elizabeth had not the nerve to ask if Major Benjy was to be of that company. It would be too bitter to know that he, who had so sternly set his face against Lucia's domination, was in process of being sucked down in that infernal whirlpool of her energetic grabbings. Almost she wished that she had asked her to be one of her bridge party to-morrow: but it was too late now. Her seven invitations—seven against Lucia—had gone forth, and not till she got home would she know whether her two bridge tables were full.

"And this winter exhibition," she asked. "What a good idea! We're all so idle in the winter at dear old Tilling, and now there's another thing to work for. Are you sending that delicious picture of the garden-room? How I enjoyed our lovely chatty mornings when you were painting it!"

By the ordinary rules of polite conversation, Georgie ought to have asked her what she was sending. He did nothing of the kind, but looked a little uncomfortable. Probably then, as Irene had told her, the exhibition was to consist of pictures sent by request of the committee, and at present they had not requested her. She felt that she must make sure about that, and determined to send in a picture without being asked. That would show for certain what was going on.

"Weren't those mornings pleasant?" said the evasive Georgie. "I was quite sorry when my picture was finished."

Georgie appeared unusually reticent: he did not volunteer any more information about the winter exhibition, nor about Lucia's telephoning, nor had he mentioned that he and Major Benjy had lunched with her to-day. She would lead him in the direction of that topic. . . .

"How happy dear Lucia is in her pretty Grebe," she said. "I took my walk along the road there to-day. Her garden, so pleasant! A high tide this afternoon. The beautiful river flowing down to the sea, and the tide coming up to meet it. Did you notice it?"

Georgie easily saw through that: he would talk about tides with pleasure, but not lunch.

"It looked lovely," he said, "but they tell me that in ten days' time the spring tides are on, and they will be much higher. The water has been over the road in front of Lucia's house sometimes."

Elizabeth went back to Mallards more uneasy than ever. Lucia was indeed busy arranging callisthenic classes and winter exhibitions and, clearly, some party at Grebe, but not a word had she said to her about any of these things, nor had she sent the recipe of lobster *à la Riseholme*. But there was nothing more to be done to-night except to take steps concerning the picture exhibition to which she had not been asked to contribute. The house was full of her sketches, and she selected quite the best of them and directed Withers to pack it up and

send it, with her card, to the Committee of the Art Club, Grebe.

The winter bridge-parties in Tilling were in their main features of a fixed and invariable pattern. An exceedingly substantial tea, including potted-meat sandwiches, was served at half-past four, and, after that was disposed of, at least three hours of bridge followed. After such a tea, nobody, as was perfectly well known, dreamed of having dinner: and though round about eight o'clock, the party broke up, with cries of astonishment at the lateness of the hour, and said it must fly back home to dress, this was a mere fashion of speech. "A tray" was the utmost refreshment that anyone could require, and nobody dressed for a solitary tray. Elizabeth was a great upholder of the dress-and-dinner fiction, and she had been known to leave a bridge-party at nine, saying that Withers would scold her for being so late, and that her cook would be furious.

So on this Saturday afternoon the party of eight (for all seven had accepted) assembled at Mallards. They were exceedingly cordial: it was as if they desired to propitiate their hostess for something presently to emerge. Also it struck that powerful observer that there was not nearly so much eaten as usual. She had provided the caviare sandwiches of which Mrs. Wyse had been known absentmindedly to eat nine, she had provided the nougat-chocolates of which Diva had been known to have eaten all, but though the chocolates were in front of Diva, and the caviare in front of Susan, neither of them exhibited anything resembling their usual greed. There was Scotch shortbread for the Padre, who, though he came from Birmingham, was insatiable with regard to that national form of biscuit, and there was whisky and soda for Major Benjy, who had no use for tea, and both of them, too, were mysteriously abstemious. Perhaps this wet muggy weather, thought Elizabeth, had made them all a trifle liverish, or very likely those callisthenics

had taken away their appetites. It was noticeable, moreover, that throughout tea nobody mentioned the name of Lucia.

They adjourned to the garden-room where two tables were set out for bridge, and till half-past six nothing momentous occurred. At that hour Elizabeth was partner to Major Benjy, and she observed with dark misgivings that when she had secured the play of the hand (at a staggering sacrifice, as it was soon to prove) he did not as usual watch her play, but got up, and standing by the fire-place indulged in some very antic movements. He bent down, apparently trying to touch his toes with his fingers and a perfect fusillade of small crackling noises from his joints (knee or hip it was impossible to tell) accompanied these athletic flexings. Then he whisked himself round to right and left as if trying to look down his back, like a parrot. This was odd and ominous conduct, this strongly suggested that he had been sucked into the callisthenic whirlpool, and what was more ominous yet was that when he sat down again he whispered to Georgie, who was at the same table, "That makes my ten minutes, old boy." Elizabeth did not like that at all. She knew now what the ten minutes must refer to, and that endearing form of address to Miss Milliner Michael-Angelo was a little worrying. The only consolation was that Georgie's attention was diverted from the game, and that he trumped his partner's best card. At the conclusion of the hand, Elizabeth was three tricks short of her contract, and another very puzzling surprise awaited her, for instead of Major Benjy taking her failure in very ill part, he was more than pleasant about it. What could be the matter with him?

"Very well played, Miss Elizabeth," he said. "I was afraid that after my inexcusable declaration we should lose more than that."

Elizabeth began to feel more keenly puzzled as to why none of them had any appetites, and why they were all

so pleasant to her. Were they rallying round her again, was their silence about Lucia a tactful approval of her absence? Or was there some hidden connection between their abstemiousness, their reticence and their unwontedly propitiatory attitude? If there was, it quite eluded her. Then as Diva dealt in her sloppy manner Lucia's name came up for the first time.

"Mr. Georgie, you ought not to have led trumps," she said. "Lucia always says—Oh, dear me, I believe I've misdealt. Oh no, I haven't. That's all right."

Elizabeth pondered this as she sorted her cards. Nobody inquired what Lucia said, and Diva's swift changing of the subject as if that name had slipped out by accident, looked as if possibly they none of them desired any allusion to be made to her. Had they done with her, she wondered? But if so, what about the callisthenics?

She was dummy now and was absorbed in watching Major Benjy's tragical mismanagement of the hand, for he was getting into a sadder bungle than anyone, except perhaps Lucia, could have involved himself in. Withers entered while this was going on, and gave Elizabeth a parcel. With her eye and her mind still glued to the cards, she absently unwrapped it, and took its contents from its coverings just as the last trick was being played. It was the picture she had sent to the Art Committee the day before and with it was a typewritten form to convey its regrets that the limited wall space at its disposal would not permit of Miss Mapp's picture being exhibited. This slip floated out on to the floor, and Georgie bent down and returned it to her. She handed it and the picture and the wrappings to Withers, and told her to put them in the cupboard. Then she leaned over the table to her partner, livid with mixed and uncontrollable emotions.

"Dear Major Benjy, what a hash!" she said. "If you had pulled out your cards at random from your hand, you could not, bar revokes, have done worse. I

think you must have been having lessons from dear Lulu. Never mind: live and unlearn."

There was an awful pause. Even the players at the other table were stricken into immobility and looked at each other with imbecile eyes. Then the most surprising thing of all happened.

"'Pon my word, partner," said Major Benjy, "I deserve all the scoldings you can give me. I played it like a baby. I deserve to pay all our losings. A thousand apologies."

Elizabeth, though she did not feel like it, had to show that she was generous too. But why didn't he answer her back in the usual manner?

"Naughty Major Benjy!" she said. "But what does it matter? It's only a game, and we all have our ups and downs. I have them myself. That's the rubber, isn't it? Not very expensive after all. Now let us have another and forget all about this one."

Diva drew a long breath, as if making up her mind to something, and glanced at the watch set with false pearls (Elizabeth was sure) on her wrist.

"Rather late to begin again," she said. "I make it ten minutes to seven. I think I ought to be going to dress."

"Nonsense, dear," said Elizabeth. "Much too early to leave off. Cut, Major Benjy."

He also appeared to take his courage in his hands, not very successfully.

"Well, upon my word, do you know, really Miss Elizabeth," he babbled, "a rubber goes on sometimes for a very long while, and if it's close on seven now, if, you know what I mean. . . . What do you say, Pillson?"

It was Georgie's turn.

"Too tarsome," he said, "but I'm afraid personally that I must stop. Such a delightful evening. Such good rubbers. . . ."

They all got up together, as if some common mech-

anism controlled their movements. Diva scuttled away to the other table, without even waiting to be paid the sum of one and threepence which she had won from Elizabeth.

"I'll see how they're getting on here," she said. "Why they're just adding up, too."

Elizabeth sat where she was and counted out fifteen pennies. That would serve Diva right for going at ten minutes to seven. Then she saw that the others had got up in a hurry, for Susan Wyse said to Mrs. Bartlett, "I'll pay you later on," and her husband held up her sable coat for her.

"Diva, your winnings," said Elizabeth, piling up the coppers.

Diva whisked round, and instead of resenting this ponderous discharge of the debt, received it with enthusiasm.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," she said. "All coppers: how nice! So useful for change. Good night, dear. Thanks ever so much."

She paused a moment by the door, already open, by which Georgie was standing.

"Then you'll call for me at twenty minutes to eight," she said to him in the most audible whisper, and Georgie with a nervous glance in Elizabeth's direction gave a silent assent. Diva vanished into the night where Major Benjy had gone. Elizabeth rose from her deserted table.

"But you're not all going too?" she said to the others. "So early yet."

Mr. Wyse made a profound bow.

"I regret that my wife and I must get home to dress," he said. "But one of the most charming evenings of bridge I have ever spent, Miss Mapp. So many thanks. Come along, Susan."

"Delicious bridge," said Susan. "And those caviare sandwiches. Good night, dear. You must come round and play with us some night soon."

"A grand game of bridge, Mistress Mapp," said the Padre. "Ah, wee wifie's callin' for me. Au reservoir."

Next moment Elizabeth was alone. Georgie had followed on the heels of the others, closing the door very carefully, as if she had fallen asleep. Instead of that she hurried to the window and peeped out between the curtains. There were three or four of them standing on the steps while the Wyses got into the Royce, and they dispersed in different directions like detected conspirators, as no doubt they were.

The odd disconnected little incidents of the evening, the lack of appetites, the propitiatory conduct to herself, culminating in this unexampled departure a full hour before bridge-parties had ever been known to break up, now grouped themselves together in Elizabeth's constructive mind. They fitted on to other facts that had hitherto seemed unrelated, but now were charged with significance. Georgie, for instance, had telephoned the day and the hour of this bridge-party to Lucia, he had accepted an invitation to something at a quarter to eight: he had promised to call for "him" and "her." There could be no reasonable doubt that Lucia had purposely broken up Elizabeth's party at this early hour by bidding to dinner the seven guests who had just slunk away to dress . . . And her picture had been returned by the Art Committee, two of whom (though she did them the justice to admit that they were but the catspaws of a baleful intelligence) had hardly eaten any caviare sandwiches at all, for fear that they should not have good appetites for dinner. Hence also Diva's abstention from nougat-chocolate, Major Benjy's from whisky, and the Padre's from shortbread. Nothing could be clearer.

Elizabeth was far from feeling unhappy or deserted, and very very far from feeling beaten. Defiance and hatred warmed her blood most pleasantly, and she spent half an hour sitting by the window, thoroughly enjoying herself. She meant to wait here till twenty minutes to eight, and if by that time she had not seen the Royce

turning the corner of Porpoise Street, and Georgie's car calling at the perfidious Major Benjy's house, she would be ready to go barefoot to Grebe, and beg Lucia's pardon for having attributed to her so devilish a device. But no such humiliating pilgrimage awaited her, for all happened exactly as she knew it would. The great glaring head-lights of the Royce blazed on the house opposite the turning to Porpoise Street, its raucous fog-horn sounded, and the porpoise car lurched into view scaring everybody by its lights and its odious voice, and by its size making foot passengers flatten themselves against the walls. Hardly had it cleared the corner into the High Street when Georgie's gay bugle piped out and his car came under the window of the garden-room, and stopped at Major Benjy's. Elizabeth's intellect, unaided by any direct outside information, except that which she had overheard on the telephone, had penetrated this hole-and-corner business, and ringing the bell for her tray, she ate the large remainder of caviare sandwiches and nougat-chocolate and fed her soul with schemes of reprisals. She could not off-hand think of any definite plan of sufficiently withering a nature, and presently, tired with mental activity, she fell into a fireside doze and had a happy dream that Dr. Dobbie had popped in to tell her that Lucia had developed undoubted symptoms of leprosy.

During the positively voluptuous week that followed Elizabeth's brief bridge-party, no fresh development occurred of the drama on which Tilling was concentrated, except that Lucia asked Elizabeth to tea and that Elizabeth refused. The rivals therefore did not meet, and neither of them seemed aware of the existence of the other. But both Grebe and Mallards had been inordinately gay; at Grebe there had been many lunches with bridge afterwards, and the guests on several occasions had hurried back for tea and more bridge at Mallards. Indeed, Tilling had never had so much lunch and tea in its life

or enjoyed so brilliant a winter season, for Diva and the Wyses and Mrs. Padre followed suit in lavish hospitality, and Georgie on one notable morning remembered that he had not had lunch or tea at home for five days; this was a record that beat Riseholme all to fits.

In addition to these gaieties there were celebrated the nuptials of Foljambe and Cadman, conducted from the bride's home, and the disposition of Foljambe's time between days with Georgie and nights with Cadman was working to admiration: everybody was pleased. At Grebe there had been other entertainments as well; the callisthenic class met on alternate days and Lucia in a tunic rather like Artemis, but with a supplementary skirt and scarlet stockings, headed a remarkable procession, consisting of Diva and the Wyses and Georgie and Major Benjy and the Padres and quaint Irene, out on to the cinder path of the kitchen-garden, and there they copied her jerks and flexings and whirlings of the arms and touchings of the toes to the great amazement of errand-boys who came legitimately to the kitchen door, and others who peered through the hornbeam hedge. On wet days the athletes assembled in the kitchen with doors flung wide to the open air, and astonished the cook with their swimming movements, an arm and leg together, while they held on with the other hand to the great kitchen table. "Uno, due, tre," counted Lucia, and they all kicked out like frogs. And quaint Irene in her knickerbockers, sometimes stood on her head, but nobody else attempted that. Lucia played them soothing music as they rested afterwards in her drawing-room; she encouraged Major Benjy to learn his notes on the piano, for she would willingly teach him: she persuaded Susan to take up her singing again, and played "La ci darem" for her, while Susan sang it in a thin shrill voice, and Mr. Wyse said "Brava! How I wish Amelia was here." Sometimes Lucia read them Pope's translation of the *Iliad* as they drank their lemonade and Major Benjy his whisky and soda, and not

content with these diversions (the wonderful creature) she was composing the address on modern art which she was to deliver at the opening of the exhibition on the day following Boxing Day. She made notes for it and then dictated to her secretary (Elizabeth Mapp's face was something awful to behold when Diva told her that Lucia had a secretary) who took down what she said on a typewriter. Indeed, Elizabeth's face had never been more awful when she heard that, except when Diva informed her that she was quite certain that Lucia would be delighted to let her join the callisthenic class.

But though, during these days, no act of direct aggression like that of Lucia's dinner-party causing Elizabeth's bridge-party to break up had been committed on either side, it was generally believed that Elizabeth was not done for yet, and Tilling was on tiptoe, expectant of some "view halloo" call to show that the chase was astir. She had refused Lucia's invitation to tea, and if she had been done for or gone to earth she would surely have accepted. Probably she took the view that the invitation was merely a test question to see how she was getting on, and her refusal showed that she was getting on very nicely. It would be absolutely unlike Elizabeth (to adopt a further metaphor) to throw up the sponge like that, for she had not yet been seriously hurt, and the bridge-party-round had certainly been won by Lucia; there would be fierce boxing in the next. It seemed likely that, in this absence of aggressive acts, both antagonists were waiting till the season of peace and goodwill was comfortably over and then they would begin again. Elizabeth would have a God-sent opportunity at the opening of the exhibition, when Lucia delivered her address. She could sit in the front row and pretend to go to sleep or suppress an obvious inclination to laugh. Tilling felt that she must have thought of that and of many other acts of reprisal unless she was no longer the Elizabeth they all knew and (within limits) respected, and (on numerous occasions) detested.

The pleasant custom of sending Christmas cards prevailed in Tilling, and most of the world met in the stationer's shop on Christmas Eve, selecting suitable salutations from the threepenny, the sixpenny and the shilling trays. Elizabeth came in rather early and had almost completed her purchases when some of her friends arrived, and she hung about looking at the backs of volumes in the lending-library, but keeping an eye on what they purchased. Diva, she observed, selected nothing from the shilling tray any more than she had herself; in fact, she thought that Diva's purchases this year were made entirely from the threepenny tray. Susan, on the other hand, ignored the threepenny tray and hovered between the sixpennies and the shillings and expressed an odiously opulent regret that there were not some "choicer" cards to be obtained. The Padre and Mrs. Bartlett were certainly exclusively threepenny, but that was always the case. However they, like everybody else, studied the other trays, so that when, next morning, they all received seasonable coloured greetings from their friends, a person must have a shocking memory if he did not know what had been the precise cost of all that were sent him. But Georgie and Lucia as was universally noticed, though without comment, had not been in at all, in spite of the fact that they had been seen about in the High Street together and going into other shops. Elizabeth therefore decided that they did not intend to send any Christmas cards and before paying for what she had chosen, she replaced in the threepenny tray a pretty picture of a robin sitting on a sprig of mistletoe which she had meant to send Georgie. There was no need to put back what she had chosen for Lucia, since the case did not arise.

Christmas Day dawned, a stormy morning with a strong gale from the south-west, and on Elizabeth's breakfast-table was a pile of letters, which she tore open. Most of them were threepenny Christmas cards, a sixpenny from Susan, smelling of musk, and none from Lucia or

Georgie. She had anticipated that, and it was pleasant to think that she had put back into the threepenny tray the one she had selected for him, before purchasing it.

The rest of her post was bills, some of which must be stoutly disputed when Christmas was over, and she found it difficult to realize the jollity appropriate to the day. Last evening various choirs of amateur riffraffs and shrill bobtails had rendered night hideous by repetitions of Good King Wenceslas and the First Noël, church-bells borne on squalls of wind and rain had awakened her while it was still dark and now sprigs of holly kept falling down from the picture-frames where Withers had perched them. Bacon made her feel rather better, and she went to church, with a mackintosh against these driving gusts of rain, and a slightly blue nose against this boisterous wind. Diva was coming to a dinner-lunch: this was an annual institution held at Wasters and Mallards alternately.

Elizabeth hurried out of church at the conclusion of the service by a side door, not feeling equal to joining in the gay group of her friends who with Lucia as their centre were gathered at the main entrance. The wind was stronger than ever, but the rain had ceased, and she battled her way round the square surrounding the church before she went home. Close to Mallards Cottage she met Georgie holding his hat on against the gale. He wished her a merry Christmas, but then his hat had been whisked off his head, something very strange happened to his hair, which seemed to have been blown off his skull, leaving a quite bare place there, and he vanished in frenzied pursuit of his hat with long tresses growing from the side of his head streaming in the wind. A violent draught eddying round the corner by the garden-room propelled her into Mallards holding on to the knocker, and it was with difficulty that she closed the door. On the table in the hall stood a substantial package, which had certainly not been there when she

left. Within its wrappings was a *terrine* of *pâté de foie gras* with a most distinguished label on it, and a card fluttered on to the floor, proclaiming that wishes for a merry Christmas from Lucia and Georgie accompanied it. Elizabeth instantly conquered the feeble temptation of sending this gift back again in the manner in which she had returned that basket of tomatoes from her own garden. Tomatoes were not *pâté*. But what a treat for Diva!

Diva arrived, and they went straight in to the banquet. The *terrine* was wrapped in a napkin, and Withers handed it to Diva. She helped herself handsomely to the truffles and the liver.

"How delicious!" she said. "And such a monster!"

"I hope it's good," said Elizabeth, not mentioning the donors. "It ought to be. Paris."

Diva suddenly caught sight of a small label pasted below the distinguished one. It was that of the Tilling grocer, and a flood of light poured in upon her.

"Lucia and Mr. Georgie have sent such lovely Christmas presents to everybody," she said. "I felt quite ashamed of myself for only having given them threepenny cards."

"How sweet of them," said Elizabeth. "What were they?"

"A beautiful box of hard chocolates for me," said Diva. "And a great pot of caviare for Susan, and an umbrella for the Padre—his blew inside out in the wind yesterday—and——"

"And this beautiful *pâté* for me," interrupted Elizabeth, grasping the nettle, for it was obvious that Diva had guessed. "I was just going to tell you."

Diva knew that was a lie, but it was no use telling Elizabeth so, because she knew it too, and she tactfully changed the subject.

"I shall have to do my exercises three times to-day after such a lovely lunch," she said, as Elizabeth began slicing the turkey. But that was not a well-chosen

topic, for subjects connected with Lucia might easily give rise to discord and she tried again and again and again, bumping, in her spinning-top manner, from one impediment to another.

"Major Benjy can play the scale of C with his right hand"—(No, that wouldn't do). "What an odd voice Susan's got: she sang an Italian song the other day at"—(Worse and worse). "I sent two pictures to the winter exhibition"—(Worse if possible: there seemed to be no safe topic under the sun). "A terrific gale, isn't it? There'll be three days of tremendous high tides for the wind is heaping them up. I should not wonder if the road by Grebe—" (she gave it up: it was no use) —"isn't flooded to-morrow."

Elizabeth behaved like a perfect lady. She saw that Diva was doing her best to keep off disagreeable subjects on Christmas Day, but there were really no others. All topics led to Lucia.

"I hope not," she said, "for with all the field-paths soaked from the rain it is my regular walk just now. But not very likely, dear, for after the last time that the road was flooded, they built the bank opposite—opposite that house much higher."

They talked for quite a long while about gales and tides and dykes in complete tranquillity. Then the proletarian diversions of Boxing Day seemed safe.

"There's a new film to-morrow at the Picture Palace about tadpoles," said Elizabeth. "So strange to think they become toads: or is it frogs? I think I must go."

"Lucia's giving a Christmas-tree for the choir-boys in the evening, in that great kitchen of hers," said Diva.

"How kind!" said Elizabeth hastily, to show she took no offence.

"And in the afternoon there's a whist drive at the Institute," said Diva. "I'm letting both my servants go, and Lucia's sending all hers too. I'm not sure I should like to be quite alone in a house along that lonely

road. We in the town could scream from a top window if burglars got into our houses and raise the alarm."

"It would be a very horrid burglar who was so wicked on Boxing Day," observed Elizabeth sententiously. "Ah, here's the plum pudding! Blazing beautifully, Withers! So pretty!"

Diva became justifiably somnolent when lunch was over, and after half an hour's careful conversation she went off home to have a nice long nap, which she expressed by the word exercises. Elizabeth wrote two notes of gratitude to the donors of the *pâté* and sat herself down to think seriously of what she could do. She had refused Lucia's invitation to tea a few days before, thus declaring her attitude, and now it seemed to her that that was a mistake, for she had cut herself off from the opportunities of reprisals which intercourse with her might have provided. She had been unable, severed like this, to devise anything at all effective; all she could do was to lie awake at night hating Lucia, and this seemed to be quite barren of results. It might be better (though bitter) to join that callisthenic class in order to get a foot in the enemy's territory. Her note of thanks for the *pâté* would have paved the way towards such a step, and though it would certainly be eating humble pie to ask to join an affair that she had openly derided, it would be pie with a purpose. As it was, for a whole week she had had no opportunities, she had surrounded herself with a smoke-cloud, she heard nothing about Lucia any more, except when clumsy Diva let out things by accident. All she knew was that Lucia, busier than any bee known to science, was undoubtedly supreme in all the social activities which she herself had been accustomed to direct, and to remain, like Achilles in his tent, did not lead to anything. Also she had an idea that Tilling expected of her some exhibition of spirit and defiance, and no one was more anxious than she to fulfil those expectations to the utmost. So she settled she would go to Grebe to-morrow, and, after thanking her in person

for the *pâté*, ask to join the callisthenic class. Tilling; and Lucia too, no doubt would take that as a sign of surrender, but let them wait a while, and they should see.

"I can't fight her unless I get in touch with her," reflected Elizabeth; "at least I don't see how, and I'm sure I've thought enough."