

## CHAPTER XI

LUCIA made no allusion whatever to her athletic triumph in the afternoon when Georgie appeared. That was not her way: she just triumphed, and left other people to talk about it. But her principles did not prevent her speaking about golf in the abstract.

"We must get more businesslike when you and I are on the Committee, Georgie," she said. "We must have competitions and handicaps, and I will give a small silver cup, the President's cup, to be competed for. There's no organisation at present, you see: great fun, but no organisation. We shall have to put our heads together over that. And foursomes: I have been reading about foursomes, when two people on one side hit the ball in turn. Pepino, I'm sure, would give a little cup for foursomes, the Lucas cup. . . . And you've brought the planchette? You must teach me how to use it. What a good employment for winter evenings, Georgie. And we must have some bridge tournaments. Wet afternoons, you know, and then tea, and then some more bridge. But we will talk about all that presently, only I warn you I shall expect you to get up all sorts of diversions for Pepino."

Lucia gave a little sigh.

"Pepino adored London," she said, "and we must cheer him up, Georgie, and not let him feel dull. You must think of lots of little diversions: little pleasant

bustling things for these long evenings : music, and bridge, and some planchette. Then I shall get up some Shakespeare readings, selections from plays, with a small part for Pepino and another for poor Daisy. I foresee already that I shall have a very busy autumn. But you must all be very kind and come here for our little entertainments. Madness for Pepino to go out after sunset. Now let us get to our planchette. How I do chatter, Georgie ! ”

Georgie explained the technique of planchette, how important it was not to push, but on the other hand not to resist its independent motions. As he spoke Lucia glanced over the directions for planchette which he had brought with him.

“ We may not get anything, ” he said. “ Abfou was very disappointing sometimes. We can go on talking : indeed, it is better not to attend to what it does. ”

“ I see, ” said Lucia, “ let us go on talking then. How late you are, Georgie. I expected you half an hour ago. Oh, you said you might be detained by a Museum Committee meeting. ”

“ Yes, we settled to shut the Museum up for the winter, ” he said. “ Just an oil-stove or two to keep it dry. I wanted—and so did Mrs. Boucher, I know—to ask you—— ”

He stopped, for Planchette had already begun to throb in a very extraordinary manner.

“ I believe something is going to happen, ” he said.

“ No, ! How interesting ! ” said Lucia. “ What do we do ? ”

“ Nothing, ” said Georgie. “ Just let it do what it likes. Let’s concéntrate : that means thinking of nothing at all. ”

Georgie of course had noticed and inwardly applauded the lofty reticence which Lucia had shown about Daisy’s disaster this afternoon. But he had the strongest suspicion

of her wish to weedj, and he fully expected that if Abfou came through and talked anything but Arabic, he would express his scorn of Daisy's golf. There would be scathing remarks, corresponding to 'snob' and those rude things about Lucia's shingling of her hair, and then he would feel that Lucia had pushed. She might say she hadn't, just as Daisy said she hadn't, but it would be very unconvincing if Abfou talked about golf. He hoped it wouldn't happen, for the very appositeness of Abfou's remarks before had strangely shaken his faith in Abfou. He had been willing to believe that it was Daisy's subconscious self that had inspired Abfou—or at any rate he tried to believe it—but it had been impossible to dissociate the complete Daisy from these violent criticisms.

Planchette began to move.

"Probably it's Arabic," said Georgie. "You never quite know. Empty your mind of everything, Lucia."

She did not answer, and he looked up at her. She had that far-away expression which he associated with renderings, of the Moonlight Sonata. Then her eyes closed.

Planchette was moving quietly and steadily along. When it came near the edge of the paper, it ran back and began again, and Georgie felt quite sure he wasn't pushing: he only wanted it not to waste its energy on the tablecloth. Once he felt almost certain that it traced out the word 'drive,' but one couldn't be sure. And was that 'committee'? His heart rather sank: it would be such a pity if Abfou was only talking about the golf-club which no doubt was filling Lucia's subconscious as well as conscious mind. . . . Then suddenly he got rather alarmed, for Lucia's head was sunk forward, and she breathed with strange rapidity.

"Lucia!" he said sharply.

Lucia lifted her head, and Planchette stopped.

"Dear me, I felt quite dreamy," she said. "Let us go on talking, Georgie. Lady Ambermere this morning: I wish you could have seen her."

"Planchette has been writing," said Georgie.

"No!" said Lucia. "Has it? May we look?"

Georgie lifted the machine. There was no Arabic at all, nor was it Abfou's writing, which in quaint little ways resembled Daisy's when he wrote quickly.

"Vittoria," he read. "I am Vittoria."

"Georgie, how silly," said Lucia, "or is it the Queen?"

"Let's see what she says," said Georgie. "I am Vittoria. I come to Riseholme. For proof, there is a dog and a Vecchia——"

"That's Italian," said Lucia excitedly. "You see, Vittoria is Italian. Vecchia means—let me see; yes, of course, it means 'old woman'. 'A dog, and an old woman who is angry.' O Georgie, you did that! You were thinking about Pug and Lady Ambermere."

"I swear I wasn't," said Georgie. "It never entered my head. Let's see what else. 'And Vittoria comes to tell you of fire and water, of fire and water. The strong elements that burn and soak. Fire and water and moonlight.'"

"O Georgie, what gibberish," said Lucia. "It's as silly as Abfou. What does it mean? Moonlight! I suppose you would say I pushed and was thinking of the Moonlight Sonata."

That base thought had occurred to Georgie's mind, but where did fire and water come in? Suddenly a stupendous interpretation struck him.

"It's most extraordinary!" he said. "We had a Museum Committee meeting just now, and Mrs. Boucher said the place was streaming wet. We settled to get some oil-stoves to keep it dry. There's fire and water for you!" Georgie had mentioned this fact about the

Museum Committee, but so casually that he had quite forgotten he had done so. Lucia did not remind him of it.

"Well, I do call that remarkable!" she said. "But I daresay it's only a coincidence."

"I don't think so at all," said Georgie. "I think it's most curious, for I wasn't thinking about that a bit. What else does it say? 'Vittoria bids you keep love and loyalty alive in your hearts. Vittoria has suffered, and bids you be kind to the suffering.'"

"That's curious!" said Lucia. "That might apply to Pepino, mightn't it? . . . O Georgie, why, of course, that was in both of our minds: we had just been talking about it. I don't say you pushed intentionally, and you mustn't say I did, but that might easily have come from us."

"I think it's very strange," said Georgie. "And then, what came over you, Lucia? You looked only half-conscious. I believe it was what the planchette directions call light hypnosis."

"No!" said Lucia. "Light hypnosis, that means half-asleep, doesn't it? I did feel drowsy."

"It's a condition of trance," said Georgie. "Let's try again."

Lucia seemed reluctant.

"I think I won't, Georgie," she said. "It is so strange. I'm not sure that I like it."

"It can't hurt you if you approach it in the right spirit," said Georgie, quoting from the directions.

"Not again this evening, Georgie," said she. "Tomorrow perhaps. It is interesting, it is curious, and somehow I don't think Vittoria would hurt us. She seems kind. There's something noble, indeed, about her message."

"Much nobler than Abfou," said Georgie, "and much

more powerful. Why, she came through at once, without pages of scribbles first! I never felt quite certain that Abfou's scribbles were Arabic."

Lucia gave a little indulgent smile.

"There didn't seem much evidence for it from what you told me," she said. "All you could be certain of was that they weren't English."

Georgie left his planchette with Lucia, in case she would consent to sit again to-morrow, and hurried back, it is unnecessary to state, not to his own house, but to Daisy's. Vittoria was worth two of Abfou, he thought . . . that communication about fire and water, that kindness to the suffering, and, hardly less, the keeping of loyalty alive. That made him feel rather guilty, for certainly loyalty to Lucia had flickered somewhat in consequence of her behaviour during the summer.

He gave a short account of these remarkable proceedings (omitting the loyalty) to Daisy, who took a superior and scornful attitude.

"Vittoria, indeed!" she said, "and Vecchia. Isn't that Lucia all over, lugging in easy Italian like that? And Pug and the angry old lady. Glorifying herself, I call it. Why, that wasn't even subconscious: her mind was full of it."

"But how about the fire and water?" asked Georgie. "It does apply to the damp in the Museum and the oil-stoves."

Daisy knew that her position as priestess of Abfou was tottering. It was true that she had not celebrated the mysteries of late, for Riseholme (and she) had got rather tired of Abfou, but it was gall and wormwood to think that Lucia should steal (steal was the word) her invention and bring it out under the patronage of Vittoria as something quite new.

"A pure fluke," said Daisy. "If she'd written

mutton and music, you would have found some interpretation for it. Such far-fetched nonsense ! ”

Georgie was getting rather heated. He remembered how when Abfou had written ‘ death ’ it was held to apply to the mulberry-tree which Daisy believed she had killed by amateur root-pruning, so if it came to talking about far-fetched nonsense, he could have something to say. Besides, the mulberry-tree hadn’t died at all, so that if Abfou meant that he was wrong. But there was no good in indulging in recriminations with Daisy, not only for the sake of peace and quietness, but because Georgie could guess very well all she was feeling.

“ But she didn’t write about mutton and music,” he observed, “ so we needn’t discuss that. Then there was moonlight. I don’t know what that means.”

“ I should call it moonshine,” said Daisy brightly.

“ Well, it wrote moonlight,” said Georgie. “ Of course there’s the Moonlight Sonata which might have been in Lucia’s mind, but it’s all curious. And I believe Lucia was in a condition of light hypnosis——”

“ Light fiddlesticks ! ” said Daisy. . . . (Why hadn’t she thought of going into a condition of light hypnosis when she was Abfouing ? So much more impressive !)  
“ We can all shut our eyes and droop our heads.”

“ Well, I think it was light hypnosis,” said Georgie firmly. “ It was very curious to see. I hope she’ll consent to sit again. She didn’t much want to.”

Daisy profoundly hoped that Lucia would not consent to sit again, for she felt Abfouism slipping out of her fingers. In any case, she would instantly resuscitate Abfou, for Vittoria shouldn’t have it all her own way. She got up.

“ Georgie, why shouldn’t we see if Abfou has anything to say about it ? ” she asked. “ After all, Abfou told us to make a museum, and that hasn’t turned out so

badly. Abfou was practical; what he suggested led to something."

Though the notion that Daisy had thought of the museum, and pushed flitted through George's mind, there was something in what she said, for certainly Abfou had written museum (if it wasn't 'mouse') and there was the Museum which had turned out so profitably for the Committee.

"We might try," he said.

Daisy instantly got out her planchette, which sadly wanted dusting, and it began to move almost as soon as they laid their hands on it: Abfou was in a rather inartistic hurry. And it really wasn't very wise of Daisy to close her eyes and snort: it was indeed light fiddlesticks to do that. It was a sheer unconvincing plagiarism from Lucia, and his distrust of Daisy and of Abfou immeasurably deepened. Furiously the pencil scribbled, going off the paper occasionally and writing on the table till Georgie could insert the paper under it: it was evident that Abfou was very indignant about something, and there was no need to inquire what that was. For some time the writing seemed to feel to Georgie like Arabic, but presently the pencil slowed down, and he thought some English was coming through. Finally Abfou gave a great scrawl, as he usually did when the message was complete, and Daisy looked dreamily up.

"Anything?" she said.

"It's been writing hard," said Georgie.

They examined the script. It began, as he had expected, with quantities of Arabic, and then (as he had expected) dropped into English, which was quite legible.

"Beware of charlatans," wrote Abfou, "beware of Southern charlatans. All spirits are not true and faithful like Abfou, who instituted your Museum. False guides deceive. A warning from Abfou."



" Well, if that isn't convincing, I don't know what is," said Daisy.

Georgie thought it convincing too.

The din of battle began to rise. It was known that very evening, for Colonel and Mrs. Boucher dined with Georgie, that he and Lucia (for Georgie did not give all the credit to Lucia) had received that remarkable message from Vittoria about fire and water and the dog and the angry old woman, and it was agreed that Abfou cut a very poor figure, and had a jealous temper. Why hadn't Abfou done something better than merely warn them against Southern Charlatans ?

" If it comes to that," said Mrs. Boucher, " Egypt is in the south, and charlatans can come from Egypt as much as from Italy. Fire and water ! Very remarkable. There's the water there now, plenty of it, and the fire will be there to-morrow. I must get out my planchette again, for I put it away. I got sick of writing nothing but Arabic, even if it was Arabic. I call it very strange. And not a word about golf from Vittoria. I consider that's most important. If Lucia had been pushing, she'd have written about her golf with Daisy. Abfou and Vittoria ! I wonder which will win."

That summed it up pretty well, for it was felt that Abfou and Vittoria could not both direct the affairs of Riseholme from the other world, unless they acted jointly; and Abfou's remarks about the Southern charlatan and false spirits put the idea of a coalition out of the question. All the time, firm in the consciousness of Riseholme, but never under any circumstances spoken of, was the feeling that Abfou and Vittoria (as well as standing for themselves) were pseudonyms: they stood also for Daisy and Lucia. And how much finer and bigger, how much more gifted of the two in every way was

Vittoria-Lucia. Lucia quickly got over her disinclination to weedj, and messages, not very definite, but of high moral significance came from this exalted spirit. There was never a word about golf, and there was never a word about Abfou, nor any ravings concerning inferior and untrustworthy spirits. Vittoria was clearly above all that (indeed, she was probably in some sphere miles away above Abfou), whereas Abfou's pages (Daisysat with her planchette morning after morning and obtained sheets of the most voluble English) were blistered with denunciations of low and earth-born intelligences and dark with awful warnings for those who trusted them.

Riseholme, in fact, had never been at a higher pitch of excited activity; even the arrival of the *Evening Gazette* during those weeks when Hermione had recorded so much about Mrs. Philip Lucas hadn't roused such emotions as the reception of a new message from Abfou or Vittoria. And it was Lucia again who was the cause of it all: no-one for months had cared what Abfou said, till Lucia became the recipient of Vittoria's messages. She had invested planchette with the interest that attached to all she did. On the other hand it was felt that Abfou (though certainly he lowered himself by these pointed recriminations) had done something. Abfou-Daisy had invented the Museum, whereas Vittoria-Lucia, apart from giving utterance to high moral sentiments, had invented nothing (high moral sentiments couldn't count as an invention). To be sure there was the remarkable piece about Pug and angry Lady Ambermere, but the facts of that were already known to Lucia, and as for the communication about fire, water and moonlight, though there were new oil-stoves in the damp Museum, that was not as remarkable as inventing the Museum, and moonlight unless it meant the Sonata was quite unexplained. Over this cavilling objection, rather timidly put forward by

Georgie, who longed for some striking vindication of Vittoria, Lucia was superb.

“ Yes, Georgie, I can't tell you what it means,” she said. “ I am only the humble scribe. It is quite mysterious to me. For myself, I am content to be Vittoria's medium. I feel it a high honour. Perhaps some day it will be explained, and we shall see.”

They saw.

Meanwhile, since no-one can live entirely on messages from the unseen, other interests were not neglected. There were bridge parties at The Hurst, there was much music, there was a reading of Hamlet at which Lucia doubled several of the principal parts and Daisy declined to be the Ghost. The new Committee of the golf-club was formed, and at the first meeting Lucia announced her gift of the President's Cup, and Pepino's of the Lucæ Cup for foursomes. Notice of these was duly put up in the Club-house, and Daisy's face was of such a grimness when she read them that something very savage from Abfou might be confidently expected. She went out for a round soon after with Colonel Boucher, who wore a scared and worried look when he returned. Daisy had got into a bunker, and had simply hewed her ball to pieces. . . . Pepino's convalescence proceeded well ; Lucia laid down the law a good deal at auction bridge, and the oil stoves at the Museum were satisfactory. They were certainly making headway against the large patches of damp on the walls, and Daisy, one evening, recollecting that she had not made a personal inspection of them, went in just before dinner to look at them. The boy in charge of them had put them out, for they only burned during the day, and certainly they were doing their work well. Daisy felt she would not be able to bring forward any objection to them at the next Committee meeting, as she had rather hoped to do. In order

to hurry on the drying process, she filled them both up and lit them so that they should burn all night. She spilt a little paraffin, but that would soon evaporate. Georgie was tripping back across the green from a visit to Mrs. Boucher, and they walked homeward together.

Georgie had dined at home that night, and working at a cross-word puzzle was amazed to see how late it was. He had pored long over a map of South America, trying to find a river of seven letters with P T in the middle, but he determined to do no more at it to-night.

"The tarsome thing," he said, "if I could get that, I'm sure it would give me thirty-one across."

He strolled to the window and pushed aside the blind. It was a moonlight night with a high wind and a few scudding clouds. Just as he was about to let the blind drop again he saw a reddish light in the sky, immediately above his tall yew-hedge, and wondered what it was. His curiosity combined with the fact that a breath of air was always pleasant before going to bed, led him to open the front-door and look out. He gave a wild gasp of dismay and horror.

The windows of the Museum were vividly illuminated by a red glow. Smoke poured out of one which apparently was broken, and across the smoke shot tongues of flame. He bounded to his telephone, and with great presence of mind rang up the fire-station at Blitton. "Riseholme," he called. "House on fire: send engine at once." He ran into his garden again, and seeing a light still in the drawing-room next door (Daisy was getting some sulphurous expressions from Abfou) tapped at the pane. "The Museum's burning," he cried, and set off across the Green to the scene of the fire.

By this time others had seen it too, and were coming out of their houses, looking like little black ants on a red

table-cloth. The fire had evidently caught strong hold, and now a piece of the roof fell in, and the flames roared upwards. In the building itself there was no apparatus for extinguishing fire, nor, if there had been, could any one have reached it. A hose was fetched from the Ambermere Arms, but that was not long enough, and there was nothing to be done except wait for the arrival of the fire-engine from Blitton. Luckily the Museum stood well apart from other houses, and there seemed little danger of the fire spreading.

Soon the bell of the approaching engine was heard, but already it was clear that nothing could be saved. The rest of the roof crashed in, a wall tottered and fell. The longer hose was adjusted, and the stream of water directed through the windows, now here, now there, where the fire was fiercest, and clouds of steam mingled with the smoke. But all efforts to save anything were absolutely vain : all that could be done, as the fire burned itself out, was to quench the glowing embers of the conflagration. . . . As he watched, three words suddenly repeated themselves in Georgie's mind. "Fire, water, moonlight," he said a loud in an awed tone. . . . Victorious Vittoria !

The committee, of course, met next morning, and Robert as financial adviser was specially asked to attend. Georgie arrived at Mrs. Boucher's house where the meeting was held before Daisy and Robert got there, and Mrs. Boucher could hardly greet him, so excited was she.

"I call it most remarkable," she said. "Dog and angry old woman never convinced me, but this is beyond anything. Fire, water, moonlight ! It's prophecy, nothing less than prophecy. I shall believe anything Vittoria says, for the future. As for Abfou—well——"

She tactfully broke off at Daisy's and Robert's entrance.

"Good morning," she said. "And good morning,

Mr. Robert. This is a disaster, indeed. All Mr. Georgie's sketches, and the walking-sticks, and the mittens and the spit. Nothing left at all."

Robert seemed amazingly cheerful.

"I don't see it as such a disaster," he said. "Lucky I had those insurances executed. We get two thousand pounds from the Company, of which five hundred goes to Colonel Boucher for his barn—I mean the Museum."

"Well, that's something," said Mrs. Boucher. "And the rest? I never could understand about insurances. They've always been a sealed book to me."

"Well, the rest belongs to those who put the money up to equip the Museum," he said. "In proportion, of course, to the sums they advanced. Altogether four hundred and fifty pounds was put up, you and Daisy and Georgie each put in fifty. The restwell, I advanced the rest."

There were some rapid and silent calculations made. It seemed rather hard that Robert should get such a lot. Business always seemed to favour the rich. But Robert didn't seem the least ashamed of that. He treated it as a perfect matter of course.

"The—the treasures in the Museum almost all belonged to the Committee," he went on. They were given to the Museum, which was the property of the Committee. Quite simple. If it had been a loan collection now—well, we shouldn't be finding quite such a bright lining to our cloud. I'll manage the insurance business for you, and pay you pleasant little cheques all round. The Company, no doubt, will ask a few questions as to the origin of the fire."

"Ah, there's a mystery for you," said Mrs. Boucher. "The oil-stoves were always put out in the evening, after burning all day, and how a fire broke out in the middle of the night beats me."

Daisy's mouth twitched. Then she pulled herself together.

"Most mysterious," she said, and looked carelessly out of the window to where the debris of the Museum was still steaming. Simultaneously, Georgie gave a little start, and instantly changed the subject, rapping on the table.

"There's one thing we've forgotten," said he. "It wasn't entirely our property. Queen Charlotte's mittens were only on loan."

The faces of the Committee fell slightly.

"A shilling or two," said Mrs. Boucher hopefully. "I'm only glad we didn't have Pug as well. Lucia got us out of that!"

Instantly the words of Vittoria about the dog and the angry old woman, and fire and water and moonlight occurred to everybody. Most of all they occurred to Daisy, and there was a slight pause, which might have become awkward if it had continued. It was broken by the entry of Mrs. Boucher's parlour-maid, who carried a letter in a large square envelope with a deep mourning border, and a huge coronet on the flap.

"Addressed to the Museum Committee, ma'am," she said.

Mrs. Boucher opened it, and her face flushed.

"Well, she's lost no time," she said. "Lady Ambermere. I think I had better read it."

"Please," said everybody in rather strained voices.

Mrs. Boucher read:

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE COMMITTEE OF RISEHOLME MUSEUM—

Your little Museum, I hear, has been totally destroyed with all its contents by fire. I have to remind you therefore that the mittens of her late Majesty Queen Charlotte were there on loan, as lent by me. No equivalent in money can really make up for the loss of so irreplaceable a relic, but I should be glad to

know, as soon as possible, what compensation you propose to offer me.

"The figure that has been suggested to me is £50, and an early cheque would oblige.

Faithfully yours,

CORNELIA AMBERMERE.

A dead silence succeeded, broken by Mrs. Boucher as soon as her indignation allowed her to speak.

"I would sooner," she said, "go to law about it, and appeal if it went against us, and carry it up to the House of Lords, than pay £50 for those rubbishy things. Why, the whole contents of the Museum weren't worth more than—well, leave it at that."

The figure at which the contents of the Museum had been insured floated into everybody's mind, and it was more dignified to "leave it at that," and not let the imagination play over the probable end of Mrs. Boucher's sentence.

The meeting entirely concurred, but nobody, not even Robert, knew what to do next.

"I propose offering her £10," said Georgie at last, "and I call that handsome."

"Five," said Daisy, like an auction reversed.

Robert rubbed the top of his head, as was his custom in perplexity.

"Difficult to know what to do," he said. "I don't know of any standard of valuation for the old clothes of deceased queens."

"Two," said Mrs. Boucher, continuing the auction, "and that's a fancy price. What would Pug have been, I wonder, if we're asked fifty pounds for two old mittens. A pound each, I say, and that's a monstrous price. And if you want to know who suggested to Lady Ambermere to ask fifty, I can tell you, and her name was Cornelia Ambermere."

This proposal of Lady Ambermere's rather damped



the secret exaltation of the Committee, though it stirred a pleasant feeling of rage. Fifty pounds was a paltry sum compared to what they would receive from the Insurance Company, but the sense of the attempt to impose on them caused laudable resentment. They broke up, to consider separately what was to be done, and to poke about the ashes of the Museum, all feeling very rich. The rest of Riseholme were there, of course, also poking about, Piggie and Goosie skipping over smouldering heaps of ash, and Mrs. Antrobus, and the Vicar and the Curate, and Mr. Stratton. Only Lucia was absent, and Georgie, after satisfying himself that nothing whatever remained of his sketches, popped in to The Hurst.

Lucia was in the music room reading the paper. She had heard, of course, about the total destruction of the Museum, that ridiculous invention of Daisy and Abfou, but not a shadow of exultation betrayed itself.

"My dear, too sad about the Museum," she said. "All your beautiful things. Poor Daisy, too, her idea."

Georgie explained about the silver lining to the cloud.

"But what's so marvellous," he said, "is Vittoria. Fire, water, moonlight. I never heard of anything so extraordinary, and I thought it only meant the damp on the walls, and the new oil-stoves. It was prophetic, Lucia, and Mrs. Boucher thinks so too."

Lucia still showed no elation. Oddly enough, she had thought it meant damp and oil-stoves, too, for she did remember what Georgie had forgotten that he had told her just before the epiphany of Vittoria: But now this stupendous fulfilment of Vittoria's communication of which she had never dreamed, had happened. As for Abfou, it was a mere waste of time to give another thought to poor dear malicious Abfou. She sighed.

"Yes, Georgie, it was strange," she said. "That was our first sitting, wasn't it? When I got so drowsy

and felt so queer. Very strange indeed: convincing, I think. But whether I shall go on sitting now, I hardly know."

"Oh, but you must," said Georgie. "After all the rubbish—"

Lucia held up a finger.

"Now, Georgie, don't be unkind," she said. "Let us say, 'Poor Daisy,' and leave it there. That's all. Any other news?"

Georgie retailed the monstrous demand of Lady Ambermere.

"And, as Robert says, it's so hard to know what to offer her," he concluded.

Lucia gave the gayest of laughs.

"Georgie, what would poor Riseholme do without me?" she said. "I seem to be made to pull you all out of difficulties. That mismanaged golf-club, Pug, and now there's this. Well, shall I be kind and help you once more?"

She turned over the leaves of her paper.

"Ah, that's it," she said. "Listen, Georgie. Sale at Pemberton's auction-rooms in Knightsbridge yesterday. Various items. Autograph of Crippen the murderer. Dear me, what horrid minds people have! Mother-of-pearl brooch belonging to the wife of the poet Mr. Robert Montgomery; a pair of razors belonging to Carlyle, all odds and ends of trumpery, you see. . . . Ah yes, here it is. Pair of riding gaiters, in good condition, belonging to His Majesty King George the Fourth. That seems a sort of guide, doesn't it, to the value of Queen Charlotte's mittens. And what do you think they fetched? A terrific sum, Georgie; fifty pounds is nowhere near it. They fetched ten shillings and sixpence."

"No!" said Georgie. "And Lady Ambermere asked fifty pounds!"

Lucia laughed again.

"Well, Georgie, I suppose I must be good-natured," she said. "I'll draft a little letter for your committee to Lady Ambermere. How you all bully me and work me to death! Why, only yesterday I said to Pepino that those months we spent in London seemed a holiday compared to what I have to do here. Dear old Riseholme! I'm sure I'm very glad to help it out of its little holes."

Georgie gave a gasp of admiration. It was but a month or two ago that all Riseholme rejoiced when Abfou called her a snob, and now here they all were again (with the exception of Daisy) going to her for help and guidance in all those employments and excitements in which Riseholme revelled. Golf-competitions and bridge tournament, and duets, and real séances, and deliverance from Lady Ambermere, and above all, the excitement supplied by her personality.

"You're too wonderful," he said, "indeed, I don't know what we should do without you."

Lucia got up.

"Well, I'll scribble a little letter for you," she said, "bringing in the price of George the Fourth's gaiters in good condition. What shall we—I mean what shall you offer? I think you must be generous, Georgie, and not calculate the exact difference between the value of a pair of gaiters in good condition belonging to a king, and that of a pair of moth-eaten mittens belonging to a queen consort. Offer her the same; in fact, I think I should enclose a treasury note for ten shillings and six stamps. That will be more than generous, it will be munificent."

Lucia sat down at her writing-table, and after a few minutes' thought, scribbled a couple of sides of note-paper in that neat handwriting that bore no resemblance to Vittoria's. She read them through, and approved.

"I think that will settle it," she said. "If there is

any further bother with the Vecchia, let me know. There's one more thing, Georgie, and then let us have a little music. How do you think the fire broke out ? ”

Georgie felt her penetrating eye was on him. She had not asked that question quite idly. He tried to answer it quite idly.

“ It's most mysterious,” he said. “ The oil stoves are always put out quite early in the evening, and lit again next morning. The boy says he put them out as usual.”

Lucia's eye was still on him.

“ Georgie, how do you think the fire broke out ? ” she repeated.

This time Georgie felt thoroughly uncomfortable. Had Lucia the power of divination ? . . .

“ I don't know,” he said. “ Have you any idea about it ? ”

“ Yes,” said Lucia. “ And so have you. I'll tell you my idea if you like. I saw our poor misguided Daisy coming out of the Museum close on seven o'clock last night.”

“ So did I,” said Georgie in a whisper.

“ Well, the oil-stoves must have been put out long before that,” said Lucia. “ Mustn't they ? ”

“ Yes,” said Georgie.

“ Then how was it that there was a light coming out of the Museum windows ? Not much of a light, but a little light, I saw it. What do you make of that ? ”

“ I don't know,” said Georgie.

Lucia held up a censoring finger.

“ Georgie, you must be very dull this morning,” she said. “ What I make of it is that our poor Daisy lit the oil-stoves again. . . And then probably in her fumbling way, she spilt some oil. Something of the sort, anyhow. In fact, I'm afraid Daisy burned down the Museum.”

There was a terrible pause.

“ What are we to do ? ” said Georgie.

Lucia laughed.

"Do?" she said. "Nothing, except never know anything about it. We know quite well that poor Daisy didn't do it on purpose. She hasn't got the pluck or the invention to be an incendiary. It was only her muddling, meddling ways."

"But the insurance money?" said Georgie.

"What about it? The fire was an accident, whether Daisy confessed what she had done or not. Poor Daisy! We must be nice to Daisy, Georgie. Her golf, her Abfou! Such disappointments. I think I will ask her to be my partner in the foursome for the Lucas Cup. And perhaps if there was another place on the golf-committee, we might propose her for it."

Lucia sighed, smiling wistfully.

"A pity she is not a little wiser," she said.

Lucia sat looking wistful for a moment. Then to Georgie's immense surprise she burst out into peals of laughter.

"My dear, what is the matter?" said Georgie.

Lucia was helpless for a little, but she gasped and recovered and wiped her eyes.

"Georgie, you *are* dull this morning!" she said. "Don't you see? Poor Daisy's meddling has made the reputation of Vittoria and crumpled up Abfou. Fire, water, moonlight: Vittoria's prophecy. Vittoria owes it all to poor dear Daisy!"

Georgie's laughter set Lucia off again, and Pepino coming in found both at it.

"Good morning, Georgie," he said. "Terrible about the Museum. A sad loss. What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing, *caro*," said Lucia. "Just a little joke of Daisy's. Not worth repeating, but it amused Georgie and me. Come, Georgie, half an hour's good practice of celestial Mozartino. We have been lazy lately."