

CHAPTER V

THE mystery of that Friday evening in the last week in June became portentous on the ensuing Saturday morning. . . .

A cab had certainly driven from the station to The Hurst late on Friday evening, but owing to the darkness it was not known who got out of it. Previously the windows of The Hurst had been very diligently cleaned all Friday afternoon. Of course the latter might be accounted for by the mere fact that they needed cleaning, but if it had been Pepino or Lucia herself who had arrived by the cab (if both of them, they would almost certainly have come by their motor), surely some sign of their presence would have manifested itself either to Riseholme's collective eye, or to Riseholme's ear. But the piano, Daisy felt certain, had not been heard, nor had the telephone tinkled for anybody. Also, when she looked out about half-past ten in the evening, and again when she went upstairs to bed, there were no lights in the house. But somebody had come, and as the servants' rooms looked out on to the back, it was probably a servant or servants. Daisy had felt so terribly interested in this that she came restlessly down, and had a quarter of an hour's weeding to see if Abfou could tell her. She had been quite unable to form any satisfactory conjecture herself, and Abfou, after writing Museum once or twice, had relapsed into rapid and unintelligible Arabic. She

did not ring up Georgie to ask his help in solving this conundrum, because she hoped to solve it unaided and be able to tell him the answer.

She went upstairs again, and after a little deep-breathing and bathing her feet in alternate applications of hot and cold water in order to produce somnolence, found herself more widely awake than ever. Her well-trained mind cantered about on scents that led nowhere, and she was unable to find any that seemed likely to lead anywhere. Of Lucia nothing whatever was known except what was accessible to anybody who spent a penny on the *Evening Gazette*. She had written to nobody, she had given no sign of any sort, and, but for the *Evening Gazette*, she might, as far as Riseholme was concerned, be dead. But the *Evening Gazette* showed that she was alive, painfully alive in fact, if Hermione could be trusted. She had been seen here, there and everywhere in London: Hermione had observed her chatting in the Park with friends, sitting with friends in her box at the opera, shopping in Bond Street, watching polo (why, she did not know a horse from a cow!) at Hurlingham, and even in a punt at Henley. She had been entertaining in her own house too: there had been dinner-parties and musical parties, and she had dined at so many houses that Daisy had added them all up, hoping to prove that she had spent more evenings than there had been evenings to spend, but to her great regret they came out exactly right. Now she was having her portrait painted by Sigismund, and not a word had she written, not a glimpse of herself had she vouchsafed, to Riseholme. . . . Of course Georgie had seen her, when he went up to stay with Olga, but his account of her had been far from reassuring. She had said that she did not care how tired she got while Pepino was enjoying London so tremendously. Why then, thought Daisy with a sense of incredulous indignation,

had Pepino come down a few Sundays ago, all by himself, and looking a perfect wreck? . . . "Very odd, *I* call it," muttered Daisy, turning over to her other side.

It was odd, and Pepino had been odd. He had dined with Georgie one night, and on the other Georgie had dined with him, but he had said nothing about Lucia that Hermione had not trumpeted to the world. Otherwise, Pepino had not been seen at all on that Sunday except when Mrs. Antrobus, not feeling very well in the middle of the Psalms on Sunday morning, had come out, and observed him standing on tip-toe and peering into the window of the Museum that looked on to the Roman Antiquities. Mrs. Antrobus (feeling much better as soon as she got into the air) had come quite close up to him before he perceived her, and then with only the curtest word of greeting, just as if she was the Museum Committee, he had walked away so fast that she could not but conclude that he wished to be alone. It was odd too, and scarcely honourable, that he should have looked into the window like that, and clearly it was for that purpose that he had absented himself from church, thinking that he would be unobserved. Daisy had not the smallest doubt that he was spying for Lucia, and had been told merely to collect information and to say nothing, for though he knew that Georgie was on the committee, he had carefully kept off the subject of the Museum on both their tête-à-tête dinners. Probably he had begun his spying the moment church began, and if Mrs. Antrobus had not so providentially felt faint, no one would have known anything about it. As it was, it was quite likely that he had looked into every window by the time she saw him, and knew all that the Museum contained. Since then, the Museum had been formally opened by Lady Ambermere, who had lent (not presented) some mittens which she said belonged to Queen Charlotte (it

was impossible to prove that they hadn't), and the committee had put up some very baffling casement curtains which would make an end to spying for ever.

Now this degrading espionage had happened three weeks ago (come Sunday), and therefore for three weeks (come Monday), Lucia must have known all about the Museum. But not a word had she transmitted on that or any other subject; she had not demanded a place on the committee, nor presented the Elizabethan spit which so often made the chimney of her music-room to smoke, nor written to say that they must arrange it all quite differently. That she had a plan, a policy about the Museum, no one who knew Lucia could possibly doubt, but her policy (which thus at present was wrapped in mystery) might be her complete and eternal ignoring of it. It would indeed be dreadful if she intended to remain unaware of it, but Daisy doubted if anyone in her position and of her domineering character could be capable of such inhuman self-control. No: she meant to do something when she came back, but nobody could guess what it was, or when she was coming.

Daisy tossed and turned as she revolved these knotty points. She was sure Lucia would punish them all for making a Museum while she was away, and not asking her advice and begging her to be president, and she would be ill with chagrin when she learned how successful it was proving. The tourist season, when char-a-bancs passed through Riseholme in endless procession, had begun, and whole parties after lunching at the Ambermere Arms went to see it. In the first week alone there had been a hundred and twenty-six visitors, and that meant a corresponding tale of shillings without reckoning sixpenny catalogues. Even the committee paid their shillings when they went in to look at their own exhibits, and there had been quite a scene when Lady Ambermere with a

party from the Hall tried to get in without paying for any of them on the ground that she had lent the Museum Queen Charlotte's mittens. Geogie, who was hanging up another picture of his, had heard it all and hidden behind a curtain. The small boy in charge of the turnstile (bought from a bankrupt circus for a mere song) had, though trembling with fright, absolutely refused to let the turnstile turn until the requisite number of shillings had been paid, and didn't care whose mittens they were which Lady Ambermere had lent, and when, snatching up a catalogue without paying for it, she had threatened to report him to the committee, this intrepid lad had followed her, continuing to say "Sixpence, please, my lady," till one of the party, in order to save brawling in a public place, had produced the insignificant sum. And if Lucia tried to get in without paying, on the ground that she and Pepino had given the stocks to the Parish Council, which had lent them to the Museum, she would find her mistake. At length, in the effort to calculate what would be the total receipts of the year if a hundred and twenty-six people per week paid their shillings, Daisy lapsed into an uneasy arithmetical slumber.

Next morning (Saturday), the mystery of that arrival at The Hurst the evening before grew infinitely more intense. It was believed that only one person had come, and yet there was no doubt that several pounds of salmon, dozens ("Literally dozens," said Mrs. Boucher, "for I saw the basket") of eggs, two chickens, a leg of lamb, as well as countless other provisions unidentified were delivered at the back door of The Hurst; a positive frieze of tradesmen's boys was strung across the Green. Even if the mysterious arrival was Lucia herself, she could not, unless the whirl and worldliness of her London life had strangely increased her appetite, eat all that before Monday. And besides, why had she not rung up Geogie, or somebody,

or opened her bedroom window on this hot morning? Or could it be Pepino again, sent down here for a rest-cure and a stuffing of his emaciated frame? But then he would not have come down without some sort of attendant to look after him. . . . Riseholme was completely baffled; never had its powers of inductive reasoning been so nonplussed, for though so much went into The Hurst, nobody but the tradesmen's boys with empty baskets came out. Georgie and Daisy stared at each other in blankness over the garden paling, and when, in despair of arriving at any solution, they sought the oracles of Abfou, he would give them nothing but hesitating Arabic.

"Which shows," said Daisy, as she put the planchette away in disgust, "that even he doesn't know, or doesn't wish to tell us." Lunch time arrived, and there were very poor appetites in Riseholme (with the exception of that Gargantuan of whom nothing was known). But as for going to The Hurst and ringing the bell and asking if Mrs. Lucas was at home all Riseholme would sooner have died lingering and painful deaths, rather than let Lucia know that they took the smallest interest in anything she had done, was doing or would do.

About three o'clock Georgie was sitting on the Green opposite his house, finishing his sketch, which the affairs of the Museum had caused him sadly to neglect. He had got it upside down on his easel and was washing some more blue into the sky, when he heard the hoot of a motor. He just looked up, and what he saw caused his hand to twitch so violently that he put a large dab of cobalt' on the middle of his red-brick house. For the motor had stopped at The Hurst, not a hundred yards away, and out of it got Lucia and Pepino. She gave some orders to her chauffeur, and then without noticing him (*perhaps* without seeing him) she followed Pepino into the house. Hardly

waiting to wash the worst of the cobalt off his house, Georgie hurried into Daisy's, and told her exactly what had happened.

"No!" said Daisy, and out they came again, and stood in the shadow of her mulberry tree to see what would happen next. The mulberry tree had recovered from the pruning of its roots (so it wasn't it which Abfou had said was dead), and gave them good shelter.

Nothing happened next.

"But it's impossible," said Daisy, speaking in a sort of conspiratorial whisper. "It's queer enough her coming without telling any of us, but now she's here, she surely must ring somebody up."

Georgie was thinking intently.

"The next thing that will happen," he said, "will be that servants and luggage will arrive from the station. They'll be here any minute; I heard the 3.20 whistle just now. She and Pepino have driven down."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Daisy. "But even now, what about the chickens and all those eggs? Georgie, it must have been her cook who came last night—she and Pepino were dining out in London—and ordered all those provisions this morning. But there were enough to last them a week. And three pints of cream, so I've heard since, and enough ice for a skating rink and—"

It was then that Georgie had the flash of intuition that was for ever memorable. It soared above inductive reasoning.

"She's having a week-end party of some of her smart friends from London," he said slowly. "And she doesn't want any of us."

Daisy blinked at this amazing light. Then she cast one withering glance in the direction of The Hurst.

"She!" she said. "And her shingles. And her seed-pearls! That's all."

A minute afterwards the station cab arrived pyramidal with luggage. Four figures disembarked, three female and one male.

"The major-domo," said Daisy, and without another word marched back into her house to ask Abfou about it all. He came through at once, and wrote 'Snob' all over the paper.

There was no reason why Georgie should not finish his sketch, and he sat down again and began by taking out the rest of the misplaced cobalt. He felt so certain of the truth of his prophecy that he just let it alone to fulfil itself, and for the next hour he never worked with more absorbed attention. He knew that Daisy came out of her house, walking very fast, and he supposed she was on her way to spread the news and forecast the sequel. But beyond the fact that he was perfectly sure that a party from London was coming down for the week-end, he could form no idea of what would be the result of that. It might be that Lucia would ask him or Daisy, or some of her old friends to dine, but if she had intended to do that she would probably have done it already. The only alternative seemed to be that she meant to ignore Riseholme altogether. But shortly before the arrival of the fast train from London at 4.30, his prophetic calm began (for he was but human) to be violently agitated, and he took his tea in the window of his drawing-room, which commanded a good view of the front garden of The Hurst, and put his opera-glasses ready to hand. The window was a big bow, and, he distinctly saw the end of Robert's brass telescope projecting from the corresponding window next door.

Once more a motor-horn sounded, and the Lucas's car drew up at the gate of The Hurst. There stepped out Mrs. Garroby-Ashton, followed by the weird bright thing which had called to take Lucia to the private view

of the Post-Cubists. Georgie had not time for the moment to rack his brain as to the name he had forgotten, for observation was his primary concern, and next he saw Lord Limpsfield, whom he had met at Olga's party. Finally there emerged a tall, slim, middle-aged man in Oxford trousers, for whom Georgie instantly conceived a deep distrust. He had thick auburn hair, for he wore no hat, and he waved his hands about in a silly manner as he talked. Over his shoulder was a little cape. Then Lucia came tripping out of the house with her short skirts and her shingles, and they all chattered together, and kissed and squealed, and pointed in different directions, and moved up the garden into the house. The door was shut, and the end of Robert's brass telescope withdrawn.

Hardly had these shameful events occurred when Georgie's telephone bell rang. It might be Daisy wanting to compare notes, but it might be Lucia asking him to tea. He felt torn in half at the idea: carnal curiosity urged him with clamour to go, dignity dissuaded him. Still halting between two opinions, he went towards the instrument, which continued ringing. He felt sure now that it was Lucia, and what on earth was he to say? He stood there so long that Foljambe came hurrying into the room, in case he had gone out.

"See who it is, Foljambe," he said.

Foljambe with amazing calm took off the receiver.

"Trunk call," she said.

He glued himself to the instrument, and soon there came a voice he knew.

"No! Is it you?" he asked. "What is it?"

"I'm motoring down to-morrow morning," said Olga, "and Princess Isabel is probably coming with me, though she is not absolutely certain. But expect her, unless I

telephone to-morrow. Be a darling and give us lunch, as we shall be late, and come and dine. Terrible hurry : good-bye."

"No, you must wait a minute," screamed Georgie. "Of course I'll do that, but I must tell you, Lucia's just come with a party from London and hasn't asked any of us."

"No!" said Olga. "Then don't tell her I'm coming. She's become such a bore. She asks me to lunch and dinner every day. How thrilling though, Georgie! Whom has she got?"

Suddenly the name of the weird bright female came back to Georgie.

"Mrs. Alingsby," he said.

"Lor!" said Olga. "Who else?"

"Mrs. Garroby-Ashton——"

"What?"

"Garr-o-by Ash-ton," said Georgie very distinctly; "and Lord Limpfield. And a tall man in Oxford trousers with auburn hair."

"It sounds like your double, Georgie," said Olga. "And a little cape like yours?"

"Yes," said Georgie rather coldly.

"I think it must be Stephen Merriall," said Olga after a pause.

"And who's that?" asked he.

"Lucia's lover," said Olga quite distinctly.

"No!" said Georgie.

"Of course he isn't. I only meant he was always there. But I believe he's Hermione. I'm not sure, but I think so. Georgie, we shall have a hectic Sunday. Good-bye, to-morrow about two or three for lunch, and two or three *for* lunch. What a gossip you are."

He heard that delicious laugh, and the click of her receiver.

Georgie was far too thrilled to gasp. He sat quite quiet, breathing gently. For the honour of Riseholme he was glad that a Princess was perhaps coming to lunch with him, but apart from that he would really have much preferred that Olga should be alone. The 'affaire Lucia' was so much more thrilling than anything else, but Princess Isabel might feel no interest in it, and instead they would talk about all sorts of dull things like kings and courts. . . . Then suddenly he sprang from his chair: there was a leg of lamb for Sunday lunch, and an apple tart, and nothing else at all. What was to be done? The shops by now would be shut.

He rang for Foljambe.

"Miss Olga's coming to lunch and possibly—possibly a friend of hers," he said. "What are we to do?"

"A leg of lamb and an apple tart's good enough for anybody, isn't it?" said Foljambe severely.

This really seemed true as soon as it was pointed out, and Georgie made an effort to dismiss the matter from his mind. But he could not stop still: it was all so exciting, and after having changed his Oxford trousers in order to minimise the likeness between him and that odious Mr. Merriall, he went out for a constitutional, round the Green from all points of which he could see any important development at The Hurst. Riseholme generally was doing the same, and his stroll was interrupted by many agreeable stoppages. It was already known that Lucia and Pepino had arrived, and that servants and luggage had come by the 3.20, and that Lucia's motor had met the 4.30 and returned laden with exciting people. Georgie therefore was in high demand, for he might supply the names of the exciting people, and he had the further information to divulge that Olga was arriving to-morrow, and was lunching with him and dining at her own house. He said nothing about a possible Princess: she might

not come, and in that case he knew that there would be a faint suspicion in everybody's mind that he had invented it; whereas if she did, she would no doubt sign his visitors' book for everyone to see.

Feeling ran stormy high against Lucia, and as usual when Riseholme felt a thing deeply there was little said by way of public comment, though couples might have been observed with set and angry faces and gabbling mouths. But higher yet ran curiosity and surmise as to what Lucia would do, and what Olga would do. Not a sign had come for anyone from The Hurst, not a soul had been asked to lunch, dinner, or even tea, and if Lucia seemed to be ashamed of Riseholme society before her grand friends, there was no doubt that Riseholme society was ashamed of Lucia. . . .

And then suddenly a deadly hush fell on these discussions, and even those who were walking fastest in their indignation came to a halt, for out of the front door of The Hurst streamed the 'exciting people' and their hosts. There was Lucia, hatless and shingled and short-skirted, and the Bird-of-Paradise and Mrs. Garroby-Ashton, and Pepino and Lord Limpsfield and Mr. Merriall all talking shrilly together, with shrieks of hollow laughter. They came slowly across the Green towards the little pond round which Riseholme stood, and passed within fifty yards of it, and if Lucia had been the Gorgon, Riseholme could not more effectually have been turned into stone. She too, appeared not to notice them, so absorbed was she in conversation, and on they went straight towards the Museum. Just as they passed Colonel Boucher's house, Mrs. Boucher came out in her bath-chair, and without pause was wheeled straight through the middle of them. She then drew up by the side of the Green below the large elm.

The party passed into the Museum. The windows

were open, and from inside them came shrieks of laughter. This continued for about ten minutes, and then . . . they all came out again. Several of them carried catalogues, and Mr. Merriall was reading out of one in a loud voice.

"Pair of worsted mittens," he announced, "belonging to Queen Charlotte, and presented by the Lady Ambermere."

"Don't," said Lucia. "Don't make fun of our dear little Museum, Stephen."

As they retraced their way along the edge of the green, movement came back to Riseholme again. Lucia's policy with regard to the Museum had declared itself. Georgie strolled up to Mrs. Boucher's bath-chair. Mrs. Boucher was extremely red in the face, and her hands were trembling.

"Good evening, Mr. Georgie," said she. "Another party of strangers, I see, visiting the Museum. They looked very odd people, and I hope we shan't find anything missing. Any news?"

That was a very dignified way of taking it, and Georgie responded in the same spirit.

"Not a scrap that I know of," he said, "except that Olga's coming down to-morrow."

"That will be nice," said Mrs. Boucher. "Riseholme is always glad to see *her*."

Daisy joined them.

"Good evening, Mrs. Quantock," said Mrs. Boucher. "Any news?"

"Yes, indeed," said Daisy rather breathlessly. "Didn't you see them? Lucia and her party?"

"No," said Mrs. Boucher firmly. "She is in London surely. Anything else?"

Daisy took the cue. Complete ignorance that Lucia was in Riseholme at all was a noble manœuvre.

"It must have been my mistake," she said. "Oh, my mulberry tree has quite come round."

"No!" said Mrs. Boucher in the Riseholme voice. "I am pleased. I daresay the pruning did it good. And Mr. Georgie's just told me that our dear Olga, or I should say Mrs. Shuttleworth, is coming down to-morrow, but he hasn't told me what time yet."

"Two or three, she said," answered Georgie. "She's motoring down, and is going to have lunch with me whenever she gets here."

"Indeed! Then I should advise you to have something cold that won't spoil by waiting. A bit of cold lamb, for instance. Nothing so good on a hot day."

"What an excellent idea!" said Georgie. "I was thinking of hot lamb. But the other's much better. I'll have it cooked to-night."

"And a nice tomato salad," said Mrs. Boucher, "and if you haven't got any, I can give you some. Send your Foljambe round, and she'll come back with half a dozen ripe tomatoes."

Georgie hurried off to see to these new arrangements, and Colonel Boucher having strolled away with Piggie, his wife could talk freely to Mrs. Quantock. . . . She did.

Lucia waking rather early next morning found she had rather an uneasy conscience as her bedfellow, and she used what seemed very reasonable arguments to quiet it. There would have been no point in writing to Georgie or any of them to say that she was bringing down some friends for the week-end and would be occupied with them all Sunday. She could not with all these guests play duets with Georgie, or get poor Daisy to give an exhibition of ouija, or have Mrs. Boucher in her bath-chair to tea, for she would give them all long histories of purely local interest, which could not conceivably

amuse people like Lord Limpsfield or weird Sophy. She had been quite wise to keep Riseholme and Brompton Square apart, for they would not mix. Besides, her guests would go away on Monday morning, and she had determined to stop over till Tuesday and be extremely kind, and not the least condescending. She would have one or two of them to lunch, and one or two more to dinner, and give Georgie a full hour of duets as well. Naturally, if Olga had been here, she would have asked Olga on Sunday but Olga had been singing last night at the opera. Lucia had talked a good deal about her at dinner, and given the impression that they were never out of each other's houses either in town or here, and had lamented her absence.

"Such a pity," she had said. "For dearest Olga loves singing in my music-room. I shall never forget how she dropped in for some little garden-party and sang the awakening of Brunnhilde. Even you, dear Sophy, with your passion for the primitive, would have enjoyed that. She sang 'Lucrezia' here, too, before anyone had heard it. Cortese brought the score down the moment he had finished it—ah, I think that was in her house—there was just Pepino and me, and perhaps one or two others. We would have had dearest Olga here all day to-morrow if only she had been here. . . ."

So Lucia felt fairly easy, having planned these treats for Riseholme on Monday, as to her aloofness to-day, and then her conscience brought up the question of the Museum. Here she stoutly defended herself: she knew nothing about the Museum (except what Pepino had seen through the window a few Sundays before); she had not been consulted about the Museum, she was not on the committee, and it was perfectly proper for her to take her party to see it. She could not prevent them bursting into shrieks of laughter at Queen Charlotte's

mittens and Daisy's drain-pipes, nor could she possibly prevent herself from joining in those shrieks of laughter herself, for surely this was the most ridiculous collection of rubbish ever brought together. A glass case for Queen Charlotte's mittens, a heap of fossils such as she had chipped out by the score from the old quarry, some fragments of glass (Georgie ought to have known better), some quilts, a dozen coins, lent, only lent, by poor Daisy! In fact the only object of the slightest interest was the pair of stocks which she and Pepino had bought and set up on the village green. She would see about that when she came down in August, and back they should go on to the village green. Then there was the catalogue: who could help laughing at the catalogue which described in most pompous language the contents of this dust-bin? There was nothing to be uneasy about over that. And as for Mrs. Boucher having driven right through her party without a glance of recognition, what did that matter? On her own side also, Lucia had given no glance of recognition to Mrs. Boucher: if she had, Mrs. Boucher would have told them all about her asparagus or how her Elizabeth had broken a plate. It was odd, perhaps, that Mrs. Boucher hadn't stopped . . . and was it rather odd also that, though from the corner of her eye she had seen all Riseholme standing about on the Green, no one had made the smallest sign of welcome? It was true that she had practically cut them (if a process conducted at the distance of fifty yards can be called a cut), but she was not quite sure that she enjoyed the same process herself. Probably it meant nothing; they saw she was engaged with her friends, and very properly had not thrust themselves forward.

Her guests mostly breakfasted upstairs, but by the middle of the morning they had all straggled down. Lucia had brought with her yesterday her portrait by

Sigismund, which Sophy declared was a masterpiece of *adagio*. She was advising her to clear all other pictures out of the music-room and hang it there alone, like a wonderful slow movement, when Mr. Merriall came in with the Sunday paper.

"Ah, the paper has come," said Lucia. "Is not that Riseholmish of us? We never get the Sunday paper till midday."

"Better late than never," said Mr. Merriall, who was rather addicted to quoting proverbial sayings. "I see that Mrs. Shuttleworth's coming down here to-day. Do ask her to dine and perhaps she'll sing to us."

Lucia paused for a single second, then clapped her hands.

"Oh, what fun that would be!" she said. "But I don't think it can be true. Dearest Olga popped in—or did I pop in—yesterday morning in town, and she said nothing about it. No doubt she had not made up her mind then whether she was coming or not. Of course I'll ring her up at once and scold her for not telling me."

Lucia found from Olga's caretaker that she and a friend were expected, but she knew they couldn't come to lunch with her, as they were lunching with Mr. Pillson. She 'couldn't say, I'm sure' who the friend was, but promised to give the message that Mrs. Lucas hoped they would both come and dine. . . . The next thing was to ring up Georgie and be wonderfully cordial.

"Georgino-mio, is it 'oo?" she asked.

"Yes," said Georgie. He did not have to ask who it was, nor did he feel inclined for baby-talk.

"Georgino, I never caught a glimpse of you yesterday," she said. "Why didn't 'oo come round and 'see me?"

"Because you never asked me," said Georgie firmly, "and because you never told me you were coming."

"Me so sorry," said Lucia. "But me was so fussed and busy in town. Delicious to be in Riseholme again."

"Delicious," said Georgie.

Lucia paused a moment.

"Is Georgino cross with me?" she asked.

"Not a bit," said Georgie brightly. "Why?"

"I didn't know. And I hear my Olga and a friend are lunching with you. I am hoping they will come and dine with me to-night, And do come in afterwards. We shall be eight already, or of course I should ask you."

"Thanks so much, but I'm dining with her," said Georgie.

A pause.

"Well, all of you come and dine here," said Lucia. "Such amusing people, and I'll squeeze you in."

"I'm afraid I can't accept for Olga," said Georgie. "And I'm dining with her, you see."

"Well, will you come across after lunch and bring them?" said Lucia. "Or tea?"

"I don't know what they will feel inclined to do," said Georgie. "But I'll tell them."

"Do, and I'll ring up at lunch-time again, and have ickle talk to my Olga. Who is her friend?"

Georgie hesitated: he thought he would not give that away just yet. Lucia would know in heaps of time.

"Oh, just somebody whom she's possibly bringing down," he said, and rang off.

Lucia began to suspect a slight mystery, and she disliked mysteries, except when she made them herself. Olga's caretaker was 'sure she couldn't say,' and Georgie (Lucia was sure) wouldn't. So she went back to her guests, and very prudently said that Olga had not arrived at present, and then gave them a wonderful account of her little *intime* dinner with Olga and Princess Isabel.

Such a delightful amusing woman: they must all come and meet Princess Isabel some day soon in town.

Lucia and her guests, with the exception of Sophy Alingsby who continued to play primitive tunes with one finger on the piano, went for a stroll on the Green before lunch. Mrs Quantock hurried by with averted face, and naturally everybody wanted to know how the Red Queen from Alice in Wonderland was. Lucia amused them by a bright version of poor Daisy's ouija-board and the story of the mulberry tree.

"Such dears they all are," she said. "But too killing. And then she planted broccoli instead of phlox. It's only in Riseholme that such things happen. You must all come and stay with me in August, and we'll enter into the life of the place. I adore it, simply adore it. We are always wildly excited about something. . . . And next door is Georgie Pillson's house. A lamb! I'm devoted to him. He does embroidery, and gave those broken bits of glass to the Museum. And that's dear Olga's house at the end of the road. . . ."

Just as Lucia was kissing her hand to Olga's house, her eagle eye had seen a motor approaching, and it drew up at Georgie's house. Two women got out, and there was no doubt whatever who either of them were. They went in at the gate, and he came out of his front door like the cuckoo out of a clock and made a low bow. All this Lucia saw, and though for the moment petrified, she quickly recovered, and turned sharply round.

"Well, we must be getting home again," she said, in a rather strangled voice. "It is lunch-time."

Mr. Merriall did not turn so quickly, but watched the three figures at Georgie's door.

"Appearances are deceptive," he said. "But isn't that Olga Shuttleworth and Princess Isabel?"

"No! Where?" said Lucia looking in the opposite direction.

"Just gone into that house; Georgie Pillson's, didn't you say?"

"No, really?" said Lucia. "How stupid of me not to have seen them. Shall I pop in now? No, I think I will ring them up presently, unless we find that they have already rung me up."

Lucia was putting a brave face on it, but she was far from easy. It looked like a plot: it did indeed, for Olga had never told her she was coming to Riseholme, and Georgie had never told her that Princess Isabel was the friend she was bringing with her. However, there was lunch-time in which to think over what was to be done. But though she talked incessantly and rather satirically about Riseholme, she said no more about the prima donna and the princess. . . .

Lucia might have been gratified (or again she might not) if she had known how vivacious a subject of conversation she afforded at Georgie's select little luncheon party. Princess Isabel (with her mouth now full of Mrs. Boucher's tomatoes) had been subjected during this last week to an incessant bombardment from Lucia, and had heard on quite good authority that she alluded to her as "Isabel, dear Princess Isabel."

"And I will not go to her house," she said. "It is a free country, and I do not choose to go to her kind house. No doubt she is a very good woman. But I want to hear more of her, for she thrills me. So does your Riseholme. You were talking of the Museum."

"Georgie, go on about the Museum," said Olga.

"Well," said Georgie, "there it was. They all went in, and then they all came out again, and one of them was reading my catalogue—I made it—aloud, and they all screamed with laughter."

"But I daresay it was a very funny catalogue, Georgie," said Olga.

"I don't think so. Mr. Merriall read out about Queen Charlotte's mittens presented by Lady Ambermere."

"No!" said Olga.

"Most interesting!" said the Princess. "She was my aunt, big aunt, is it? No, great-aunt—that is it. Afterwards we will go to the Museum and see her mittens. Also, I must see the lady who kills mulberry trees. Olga, can't you ask her to bring her planchette and prophesy?"

"Georgie, ring up Daisy, and ask her to come to tea with me," said Olga. "We must have a weedj."

"And I must go for a drive, and I must walk on the Green, and I must have some more delicious apple pie," began the Princess.

Georgie had just risen to ring up Daisy, when Foljambe entered with the news that Mrs. Lucas was on the telephone and would like to speak to Olga.

"Oh, say we're still at lunch, please, Foljambe," said she. "Can she send a message? And you say Stephen Merriall is there, Georgie?"

"No, you said he was there," said Georgie. "I only described him."

"Well, I'm pretty sure it is he, but you will have to go sometime this afternoon and find out. If it is, he's Hermione, who's always writing about Lucia in the *Evening Gazette*. Priceless! So you must go across for a few minutes, Georgie, and make certain."

Foljambe came back to ask if Mrs. Lucas might pop in to pay her respects to Princess Isabel.

"So kind of her, but she must not dream of troubling herself," said the Princess.

Foljambe retired and appeared for the third time with a faint, firm smile.

"Mrs. Lucas will ring up Mrs. Shuttleworth in a quarter of an hour," she said.

The Princess finished her apple-tart.

"And now let us go and see the Museum," she said.

Georgie remained behind to ring up Daisy, to explain when Lucia telephoned next that Olga had gone out, and to pay his visit to the Hurst. To pretend that he did not enjoy that, would be to misunderstand him altogether. Lucia had come down here with her smart party and had taken no notice of Riseholme, and now two people a million times smarter had by a clearly providential dealing come down at the same time and were taking no notice of her. Instead they were hobnobbing with people like himself and Daisy whom Lucia had slighted. Then she had laughed at the Museum, and especially at the catalogue and the mittens, and now the great-niece of the owner of the mittens had gone to see them. That was a stinger, in fact it was all a stinger, and well Lucia deserved it.

He was shown into the music-room, and he had just time to observe that there was a printed envelope on the writing-table addressed to the *Evening Gazette* when Lucia and Mr. Merriall came hurrying in.

"Georgino mio," said Lucia effusively. "How nice of you to come in. But you've not brought your ladies? Oh, this is Mr. Merriall."

(Hermione, of the *Evening Gazette*, it's proved, thought Georgie.)

"They thought they wouldn't add to your big party," said Georgie sumptuously. (That was another stinger.)

"And it was Princess Isabel I saw at your door?" asked Mr. Merriall with an involuntary glance at the writing-table. (Lucia had not mentioned her since.)

"Oh yes. They just motored down and took pot-luck with me."

"What did you give them?" asked Lucia, forgetting her anxieties for a moment.

"Oh, just cold lamb and apple tart," said Georgie.

"No!" said Lucia. "You ought to have brought them to lunch here. O Georgie, my picture, look. By Sigismund."

"Oh yes," said Georgie. "What's it of?"

"*Cattivo!*" said Lucia. "Why, it's a portrait of me. Sigismund, you know, he's the great rage in London just now. Everyone is crazy to be painted by him."

"And they look crazy when they are. It's a mad world, my masters," said Mr. Merriall.

"Naughty," said Lucia. "Is it not wonderful, Georgie?"

"Yes. I expect it's very clever," said Georgie. "Very clever indeed."

"I should like to show it dearest Olga," said Lucia, "and I'm sure the Princess would be interested in it. She was talking about modern art the other day when I dined with Olga. I wonder if they would look in at tea-time, or indeed any other time."

"Not very likely, I'm afraid," said Georgie, "for Daisy Quantock's coming to tea, I know. We're going to weedj. And they're going out for a drive sometime."

"And where are they now?" asked Lucia. It was terrible to have to get news of her intimate friends from Georgie, but how else was she to find out?

"They went across to see the Museum," said he. "They were most interested in it."

Mr. Merriall waved his hands, just in the same way as Georgie did.

"Ah, that Museum!" he said. "Those mittens! Shall I ever get over those mittens? Lucia said she would give it the next shoe-lace she broke."

"Yes," said Georgie. "The Princess wanted to

see those mittens. Queen Charlotte was her great-aunt. I told them how amused you all were at the mittens."

Lucia had been pressing her finger to her forehead, a sign of concentration. She rose as if going back to her other guests.

"Coming into the garden presently?" she asked, and glided from the room.

"And so you're going to have a sitting with the ouija-board," said Mr. Merriall. "I am intensely interested in ouija. Very odd phenomena certainly occur. Strange but true."

A fresh idea had come into Georgie's head. Lucia certainly had not appeared outside the window that looked into the garden, and so he walked across to the other one which commanded a view of the Green. There she was heading straight for the Museum.

"It is marvellous," he said to Mr. Merriall. "We have had some curious results here, too."

Mr. Merriall was moving daintily about the room, and Georgie wondered if it would be possible to convert Oxford trousers into an ordinary pair. It was dreadful to think that Olga, even in fun, had suggested that such a man was his double. There was the little cape as well.

"I have quite fallen in love with your Riseholme," said Mr. Merriall.

"We all adore it," said Georgie, not attending very much because his whole mind was fixed on the progress of Lucia across the Green. Would she catch them in the Museum, or had they already gone? Smaller and smaller grew her figure and her twinkling legs, and at last she crossed the road and vanished behind the belt of shrubs in front of the tithe-barn.

"All so homey and intimate. 'Home, Sweet Home,' in fact," said Mr. Merriall. "We have been hearing how Mrs. Shuttleworth loves singing in this room."

Georgie was instantly on his guard again. It was quite right and proper that Lucia should be punished, and of course Riseholme would know all about it, for indeed Riseholme was administering the punishment. But it was a very different thing to let her down before those who were not Riseholme.

"Oh yes, she sings here constantly," he said. "We are all in and out of each other's houses. But I must be getting back to mine now."

Mr. Merriall longed to be asked to this little ouija party at Olga's, and at present his hostess had been quite unsuccessful in capturing either of the two great stars. There was no harm in trying. . . .

"You couldn't perhaps take me to Mrs. Shuttleworth's for tea?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid I could hardly do that," said Georgie. "Good-bye. I hope we shall meet again."

Nemesis meantime had been dogging Lucia's footsteps, with more success than Lucia was having in dogging Olga's. She had arrived, as Georgie had seen, at the Museum, and again paid a shilling to enter that despised exhibition. It was rather full, for visitors who had lunched at the Ambermere Arms had come in, and there was quite a crowd round Queen Charlotte's mittens, among whom was Lady Ambermere herself who had driven over from the Hall with two depressed guests whom she had forced to come with her. She put up her glasses and stared at Lucia.

"Ah, Mrs. Lucas!" she said with the singular directness for which she was famous. "For the moment I did not recognise you with your hair like that. It is a fashion that does not commend itself to me. You have come in, of course, to look at Her late Majesty's mittens, for really there is very little else to see."

As a rule, Lucia shamelessly truckled to Lady Ambermere, and schemed to get her to lunch or dinner. But today she didn't care two straws about her, and while these rather severe remarks were being addressed to her, her eyes darted eagerly round the room in search of those for whom she would have dropped Lady Ambermere without the smallest hesitation.

"Yes, dear Lady Ambermere," she said. "So interesting to think that Queen Charlotte wore them. Most good of you to have presented them to our little Museum."

"Lent," said Lady Ambermere. "They are heirlooms in my family. But I am glad to let others enjoy the sight of them. And by a remarkable coincidence I have just had the privilege of showing them to a relative of their late owner. Princess Isabel. I offered to have the case opened for her, and let her try them on. She said, most graciously, that it was not necessary."

"Yes, dear Princess Isabel," said Lucia, "I heard she had come down. Is she here still?"

"No. She and Mrs. Shuttleworth have just gone. A motor drive, I understand, before tea. I suggested, of course, a visit to the Hall, where I would have been delighted to entertain them. Where did they lunch?"

"At Georgie Pillsons," said Lucia bitterly.

"Indeed. I wonder why Mr. Pillson did not let me know. Did you lunch there too?"

"No. I have a party in my own house. Some friends from London, Lord Limpsfield, Mrs. Garroby-Ashton——"

"Indeed!" said Lady Ambermere. "I had meant to return to the Hall for tea, but I wil' change my plans and have a cup of tea with you, Mrs. Lucas. Perhaps you would ask Mrs. Shuttleworth and her distinguished guest to drop in. I will present you to her. You have a pretty little garden, I remember. Quaint. You are at liberty to say that I am taking tea with you.

But stay! If they have gone out for a drive, they will not be back quite yet. It does not matter: we will sit in your garden."

• Now in the ordinary way this would have been a most honourable event, but to-day, though Lady Ambermere had not changed, her value had. If only Olga had not come down bringing her whom Lucia could almost refer to as that infernal Princess, it would have been rich, it would have been glorious, to have Lady Ambermere dropping in to tea. Even now she would be better than nothing, thought Lucia, and after inspecting the visitors' book of the Museum, where Olga and the Princess had inscribed their names, and where now Lady Ambermere wrote hers, very close to the last one, so as to convey the impression that they were one party, they left the place.

Outside was drawn up Lady Ambermere's car, with her companion, the meek Miss Lyall, sitting on the front seat nursing Lady Ambermere's stertorous pug.

"Let me see," said she. "How had we best arrange? A walk would be good for Pug before he has his tea. Pug takes lukewarm milk with a biscuit broken up into it. Please put Pug on his leash, Miss Lyall, and we will all walk across the Green to Mrs. Lucas's little house. The motor shall go round by the road and wait for us there. That is Mrs. Shuttleworth's little house, is it not? So you might kindly step in there, Mrs. Lucas, and leave a message for them about tea, stating that I shall be there. We will walk slowly and you will soon catch us up."

The speech was thoroughly Ambermerian: everybody in Riseholme had a 'little house' compared with the Hall: everybody had a 'little garden.' Equally Ambermerian was her complete confidence that her wish was everybody else's pleasure, and Lucia dismally reflected that she, for her part, had never failed to indicate that it was. But just now, though Lady Ambermere was so

conspicuously second-best, and though she was like a small luggage-engine with a Roman nose and a fat dog, the wretched Lucia badly wanted somebody to 'drop in,' and by so doing give her some sort of status—ala., that one so lately the Queen of Riseholme should desire it—in the sight of her guests. She could say what a bore Lady Ambermere was the moment she had gone.

Wretched also was her errand: she knew that Olga and the infernal Princess were to have a ouija with Daisy and Georgie, and that her invitation would be futile, and as for that foolish old woman's suggestion that her presence at The Hurst would prove an attraction to Olga, she was aware that if anything was needful to make Olga refuse to come, it would be that Lady Ambermere was there. Olga had dined at The Hall once, and had been induced to sing, while her hostess played Patience and talked to Pug.

Lucia had a thought: not a very bright one, but comparatively so. She might write her name in the Princess's book: that would be something. So, when her ring was answered, and she ascertained, as she already knew, that Olga was out, and left the hopeless invitation that she and her guest would come to tea, where they would meet Lady Ambermere, she asked for the Princess's book.

Olga's parlourmaid looked puzzled.

"Would that be the book of cross-word puzzles, ma'am?" she asked. "I don't think her Highness brought any other book, and that's she taken with her for her drive."

Lucia trudged sadly away. Halfway across the Green she saw Georgie and Daisy Quantock with a large sort of drawing-board under her arm coming briskly in her direction. She knew where they were going, and she pulled her shattered forces together.

"Dearest Daisy, not set eyes on you!" she said. "A few friends from London, how it ties one! But I shall pop in to-morrow, for I stop till Tuesday. Going to have a ouija party with dear Piggie and Goosie? Wish I could come, but Lady Ambermere has quartered herself on me for tea, and I must run on and catch her up. Just been to your delicious Museum. Wonderful mittens! Wonderful everything. Pepino and I will look out something for it!"

"Very kind," said Daisy. It was as if the North Pole had spoken.

Pug and Miss Lyall and Lady Ambermere and her two depressed guests had been admitted to The Hurst before Lucia caught them up, and she found them all seated stonily in the music-room, where Stephen Merriall had been finishing his official correspondence. Well Lucia knew what he had been writing about: there might perhaps be a line or two about The Hurst, and the party week-ending there, but that, she was afraid, would form a mere little postscript to more exalted paragraphs. She hastily introduced him to Lady Ambermere and Miss Lyall, but she had no idea who Lady Ambermere's guests were, and suspected they were poor relations, for Lady Ambermere introduced them to nobody.

Pug gave a series of wheezy barks.

"Clever little man," said Lady Ambermere. "He is asking for his tea. He barks four times like that for his tea."

"And he shall have it," said Lucia. "Where are the others, Stephen?"

Mr. Merriall exerted himself a little on hearing Lady Ambermere's name: he would put in a sentence about her. . . .

"Lord Limpsfield and Mrs. Garroby-Ashton have gone to play golf," he said. "Barbarously energetic

of them, is it not, Lady Ambermere? What a sweet little dog."

"Pug does not like strangers," said Lady Ambermere. "And I am disappointed not to see Lord Limpsfield. Do we expect Mrs. Shuttleworth and the Princess?"

"I left the message," said Lucia.

Lady Ambermere's eyes finished looking at Mr. Merriall and proceeded slowly round the room.

"What is that curious picture?" she said. "I am completely puzzled."

Lucia gave her bright laugh: it was being an awful afternoon, but she had to keep her flag flying.

"Striking, is it not?" she said. "Dear Benjy Sigismund insisted on painting me. Such a lot of sittings."

Lady Ambermere looked from one to the other.

"I do not see any resemblance," she said. "It appears to me to resemble nothing. Ah, here is tea. A little lukewarm milk for Pug, Miss Lyall. Mix a little hot water with it, it does not suit him to have it quite cold. And I should like to see Mr. Georgie Pillson. No doubt he could be told that I am here."

This was really rather desperate: Lucia could not produce Olga or the Princess, or Lord Limpsfield or Mrs. Garroby-Ashton for Lady Ambermere, and she knew she could not produce Georgie, for by that time he would be at Olga's. All that was left for her was to be able to tell Lord Limpsfield and Mrs. Garroby-Ashton when they returned that they had missed Lady Ambermere. As for Riseholme . . . but it was better not to think how she stood with regard to Riseholme, which, yesterday, she had settled to be of no account at all. If only, before coming down, she had asked them all to lunch and tea and dinner. . . .

The message came back that Mr. Pillson had gone to

tea with Mrs. Shuttleworth. Five minutes later came regrets from Olga that she had friends with her, and could not come to tea. Lady Ambermere ate seed cake in silence. Mrs. Alingsby meantime had been spending the afternoon in her bedroom, and she now appeared in a chintz wrapper and morocco slippers. Her hair fell over her eyes like that of an Aberdeen terrier, and she gave a shrill scream when she saw Pug.

"I can't bear dogs," she said. "Take that dog away, dear Lucia. Burn it, drown it! You told me you hadn't got any dogs."

Lady Ambermere turned on her a face that should have instantly petrified her, if she had had any proper feeling. Never had Pug been so blasphemed. She rose as she swallowed the last mouthful of seed cake.

"We are inconveniencing your guests, Mrs. Lucas," she said. "Pug and I will be off. Miss Lyall, Pug's leash. We must be getting back to the Hall. I shall look in at Mrs. Shuttleworth's, and sign my name in the Princess's book. Good-bye, Mrs. Lucas. Thank you for my tea."

Sue pointedly ignored Mrs. Alingsby, and headed the gloomy frieze that defiled through the door. The sole bright spot was that she would find only a book of cross-word puzzles to write her name in.