

CHAPTER VI

LUCIA'S guests went off by the early train next morning and she was left, like Marius among the ruins of Carthage. But, unlike that weak-hearted senator, she had no intention of mourning: her first function was to rebuild, and presently she became aware that the work of rebuilding had to begin from its very foundations. There was as background the fact that her week-end party had not been a triumphant success, for she had been speaking in London of Riseholme being such a queer dear old-fashioned little place, where everybody adored her, and where Olga kept incessantly running in to sing acts and acts of the most renowned operas in her music-room; she had also represented Princess Isabel as being a dear and intimate friend, and these two cronies of hers had politely but firmly refused all invitations to pop in. Lady Ambermere, it is true, had popped in, but nobody had seemed the least impressed with her, and Lucia had really been very glad when after Sophy's painful remarks about Pug, she had popped out, leaving that astonished post-cubist free to inquire who that crashing old hag was. Of course all this could be quickly lived down again when she got to London, but it certainly did require obliteration.

What gave her more pause for thought was the effect that her week-end had produced on Riseholme. Lucia knew that all Riseholme knew that Olga and the Princess had lunched off cold lamb with Georgie, and had never been near The Hurst, and Riseholme, if she knew Riseholme at all, would have something to talk about there.

Riseholme knew also that Lucia and her party had shrieked with laughter at the Museum, while the Princess had politely signed her name in the visitors-book after reverently viewing her great-aunt's mittens. But what else had been happening, whether Olga was here still, what Daisy and her ouija board had been up to, who had dined (if anyone except Georgie) at Olga's last night, Lucia was at present ignorant, and all that she had to find out, for she had a presentiment that nobody would pop in and tell her. Above all, what was Riseholme saying about her? How were they taking it all?

Lucia had determined to devote this day to her old friends, and she rang up Daisy and asked her and Robert to lunch. Daisy regretted that she was engaged, and rang off with such precipitation that (so it was easy to guess) she dropped the receiver on the floor, said 'Drat,' and replaced it. Lucia then rang up Mrs. Boucher and asked her and the colonel to lunch. Mrs. Boucher with great emphasis said that she had got friends to lunch. Of course that might mean that Daisy Quantock was lunching there; indeed it seemed a very natural explanation, but somehow it was far from satisfying Lucia.

She sat down to think, and the unwelcome result of thought was a faint suspicion that just as she had decided to ignore Riseholme while her smart party from London was with her, Riseholme was malignant enough to retaliate. It was very base, it was very childish, but there was that possibility. She resolved to put a playful face on it and rang up Georgie. From the extraordinary celerity with which he answered, she wondered whether he was expecting a call from her or another.

"Georgino mio!" she said.

The eagerness with which Georgie had said "Yes. Who is it?" seemed to die out of his voice.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "Good morning."

Lucia was not discouraged.

"Me coming round to have good long chat," she said. "All my tiresome guests have gone, Georgie, and I'm staying till *domani*. So lovely to be here again."

"Si," said Georgie; "just 'si.'"

The faint suspicion became a shade more definite.

"Coming at once then," said Lucia.

Lucia set forth and emerging on to the Green, was in time to see Daisy Quantock hurry out of Georgie's house and bolt into her own like a plump little red-faced rabbit. Somehow that was slightly disconcerting: it required very little inductive reasoning to form the theory that Daisy had popped in to tell Georgie that Lucia had asked her to lunch, and that she had refused. Daisy must have been present also when Lucia rang Georgie up and instead of waiting to join in the good long chat had scuttled home again. A slight effort therefore was needed to keep herself up to the gay playful level and be quite unconscious that anything unpropitious could possibly have occurred. She found Georgie with his sewing in the little room which he called his study because he did his embroidery there. He seemed somehow to Lucia to be encased in a thin covering of ice, and she directed her full effulgence to the task of melting it.

"Now that is nice!" she said. "And we'll have a good gossip. So lovely to be in Riseholme again. And isn't it naughty of me? I was almost glad when I saw the last of my guests off this morning, and promised myself a real Riseholme day. Such dears all of them, too, and tremendously in the movement; such arguments and discussions as we had! All day yesterday I was occupied, talks with one, strolls with another, and all the time I was longing to trot round and see you and Daisy and all the rest; Any news, Georgie? What did you do with yourself yesterday?"

"Well, I was very busy too," said Georgie. "Quite a rush. I had two guests at lunch, and then I had tea at Olga's——"

"Is she here still?" asked Lucia. She did not intend to ask that, but she simply could not help it.

"Oh yes. She's going to stop here two or three days, as she doesn't sing in London again till Thursday."

Lucia longed to ask if the Princess was remaining as well, but she had self control enough not to. Perhaps it would come out some other way. . . .

"Dear Olga," said Lucia effusively. "I reckon her quite a Riseholmite."

"Oh quite," said Georgie, who was determined not to let his ice melt. "Yes: I had tea at Olga's, and we had the most wonderful weedj. Just she and the Princess and Daisy and I."

Lucia gave her silvery peal of laughter. It sounded as if it had 'turned' a little in this hot weather, or got a little tarnished.

"Dear Daisy!" she said. "Is she not priceless? How she adores her conjuring tricks and hocus-pocuses! Tel! me all about it. An Egyptian guide: Abfou, was it not?"

Georgie thought it might be wiser not to tell Lucia all that Abfou had vouchsafed, unless she really insisted, for Abfou had written the most sarcastic things about her in perfect English at top-speed. He had called her a snob again, and said she was too grand now for her old friends, and had been really rude about her shingled hair.

"Yes, Abfou," he said. "Abfou was in great form, and Olga has telegraphed for a planchette. Abfou said she was most psychical, and had great mediumistic gifts. Well, that went on a long time."

"What else did Abfou say?" asked Lucia, fixing Georgie with her penetrating eye.

" Oh, he talked about Riseholme affairs," said Georgie. " He knew the Princess had been to the Museum, for he had seen her there. It was he, you know, who suggested the Museum. He kept writing Museum, though we thought it was Mouse at first."

Lucia felt perfectly certain in her own mind that Abfou had been saying things about her. But perhaps, as it was Daisy who had been operating, it was better not to ask what they were. Ignorance was not bliss, but knowledge might be even less blissful. And Georgie was not thawing: he was polite, he was reserved, but so far from chatting, he was talking with great care. She must get him in a more confidential mood.

" That reminds me," she said. " Pepino and I haven't given you anything for the Museum yet. I must send you the Elizabethan spit from my music-room. They say it is the most perfect spit in existence. I don't know what Pepino didn't pay for it."

" How kind of you," said Georgie. " I will tell the committee of your offer. Olga gave us a most magnificent present yesterday: the manuscript of 'Lucrezia,' which Cortese had given her. I took it to the Museum directly after breakfast, and put it in the glass case opposite the door."

Again Lucia longed to be as sarcastic as Abfou, and ask whether a committee meeting had been held to settle if this should be accepted. Probably Georgie had some perception of that, for he went on in a great hurry.

" Well, the weedj lasted so long that I had only just time to get home to dress for dinner and go back to Olga's," he said.

" Who was there ? " asked Lucia.

" Colonel and Mrs. Boucher, that's all," said Georgie. " And after dinner Olga sang too divinely. I played her accompaniments. A lot of Schubert songs."

Lucia was beginning to feel sick with envy. She pictured to herself the glory of having taken her party across to Olga's after dinner last night, of having played the accompaniments instead of Georgie (who was a miserable accompanist), of having been persuaded afterwards to give them the little morsel of Stravinski, which she had got by heart. How brilliant it would all have been; what a sumptuous paragraph Hermione would have written about her week-end! Instead of which Olga had sung to those old Bouchers, neither of whom knew one note from another, nor cared the least for the distinction of hearing the prima-donna sing in her own house. The bitterness of it could not be suppressed.

"Dear old Schubert songs!" she said with extraordinary acidity. "Such sweet old-fashioned things. 'Wiedmung,' I suppose."

"No, that's by Schumann," said Georgie, who was nettled by her tone, though he guessed what she was suffering.

Lucia knew he was right, but had to uphold her own unfortunate mistake.

Schubert, I think," she said. "Not that it matters. And so, as dear old Pepys said, and so to bed?"

Georgie was certainly enjoying himself.

"Oh no, we didn't go to bed till terribly late," he said. "But you would have hated to be there, for what we did next. We turned on the gramophone—"

Lucia gave a little wince. Her views about gramophones as being a profane parody of music, were well known.

"Yes, I should have run away then," she said.

"We turned on the gramophone and danced!" said Georgie firmly.

This was the worst she had heard yet. Again she pictured what yesterday evening might have been. The

idea of having popped in with her party after dinner, to hear Olga sing, and then dance impromptu with a prima-donna and a princess. . . . It was agonising: it was intolerable.

She gave a dreadful little titter.

"How very droll!" she said. "I can hardly imagine it. Mrs. Boucher in her bath-chair must have been an unwieldy partner, Georgie. Are you not very stiff this morning?"

"No, Mrs. Boucher didn't dance," said Georgie with fearful literalness. She looked on and wound up the gramophone. Just we four danced: Olga and the Princess and Colonel Boucher and I."

Lucia made a great effort with herself. She knew quite well that Georgie knew how she would have given anything to have brought her party across, and it only made matters worse (if they could be made worse) to be sarcastic about it and pretend to find it all ridiculous. Olga certainly had left her and her friends alone, just as she herself had left Riseholme alone, in this matter of her week-end party. Yet it was unwise to be withering about Colonel Boucher's dancing. She had made it clear that she was busy with her party, and but for this unfortunate accident of Olga's coming down, nothing else could have happened in Riseholme that day except by her dispensing. It was unfortunate, but it must be lived down, and if dear old Riseholme was offended with her, Riseholme must be propitiated.

"Great fun it must have been," she said. "How delicious a little impromptu thing like that is! And singing too: well, you had a nice evening, Georgie. And now let us make some delicious little plan for to-day. Pop in presently and have 'ickle music and bit of lunch."

"I'm afraid I've just promised to lunch with Daisy," said he.

This again was rather ominous, for there could be no doubt that Daisy, having said she was engaged, had popped in here to effect an engagement.

"How gay!" said Lucia. "Come and dine this evening then! Really, Georgie, you are busier than any of us in London."

"Too tarsome," said Georgie, "because Olga's coming in here."

"And the Princess?" asked Lucia before she could stop herself.

"No, she went away this morning," said Georgie.

That was something, anyhow, thought Lucia. One distinguished person had gone away from Riseholme. She waited, in slowly diminishing confidence, for Georgie to ask her to dine with him instead. Perhaps he would ask Pepino too, but if not, Pepino would be quite happy with his telescope and his cross-words all by himself. But it was odd and distasteful to wait to be asked to dinner by anybody in Riseholme instead of everyone wanting to be asked by her.

"She went away by the ten thirty," said Georgie, after an awful pause.

Lucia had already learned certain lessons in London. If you get a snub—and this seemed very like a snub—the only possible course was to be unaware of it. So, though the thought of being snubbed by Georgie nearly made her swoon, she was unaware of it.

"Such a good train," she said, magnificently disregarding the well-known fact that it stopped at every station, and crawled in between.

"Excellent," said Georgie with conviction. He had not the slightest intention of asking Lucia to dine, for he wanted his tête-à-tête with Olga. There would be such a lot to talk over, and besides it would be tiresome to have Lucia there, for she would be sure to gabble away

about her wonderful life in London, and her music-room and her Chippendale chairs, and generally to lay down the law. She must be punished too, for her loathsome conduct in disregarding her old friends when she had her party from London, and be made to learn that her old friends were being much smarter than she was.

Lucia kept her end up nobly.

"Well, Georgie, I must trot away," she said. "Such a lot of people to see. Look in, if you've got a spare minute. I'm off again to-morrow. Such a whirl of things in London this week."

Lucia, instead of proceeding to see lots of people, went back to her house and saw Pepino. He was sitting in the garden in very old clothes, smoking a pipe, and thoroughly enjoying the complete absence of anything to do. He was aware that officially he loved the bustle of London, but it was extremely pleasant to sit in his garden and smoke a pipe, and above all to be rid of those rather hectic people who had talked quite incessantly from morning till night all Sunday. He had given up the cross-word, and was thinking over the material for a sonnet on Tranquillity, when Lucia came out to him.

"I was wondering, Pepino," she said, "if it would not be pleasanter to go up to town this afternoon. We should get the cool of the evening for our drive, and really, now all our guests have gone, and we are going to-morrow, these hours will be rather tedious. We are spoilt, *caro*, you and I, by our full life up there, where any moment the telephone bell may ring with some delightful invitation. Of course in August we will be here, and settle down to our quaint old life again, but these little odds and ends of time, you know."

Pepino was reasonably astonished. Half an hour ago Lucia had set out, burning with enthusiasm to pick up the 'old threads,' and now all she seemed to want to do

was to drop the old threads as quickly as possible. Though he knew himself to be incapable of following the swift and antic movements of Lucia's mind, he was capable of putting two and two together. He had been faintly conscious all yesterday that matters were not going precisely as Lucia wished, and knew that her efforts to entice Olga and her guest to the house had been as barren as a fig-tree, but there must have been something more than that. Though not an imaginative man (except in thinking that words rhymed when they did not), it occurred to him that Riseholme was irritated with Lucia, and was indicating it in some unusual manner.

"Why, my dear, I thought you were going to have people in to lunch and dinner," he said, "and see about sending the spit to the Museum, and be tremendously busy all day."

Lucia pulled herself together. She had a momentary impulse to confide in Pepino and tell him all the ominous happenings of the last hour, how Daisy had said she was engaged for lunch and Mrs. Boucher had friends to lunch, and Georgie had Olga to dinner and had not asked her, and how the munificent gift of the spit was to be considered by the Museum committee before they accepted it. But to have done that would be to acknowledge not one snub but many snubs, which was contrary to the whole principle of successful attainment. Never must she confess, even to Pepino, that the wheels of her chariot seemed to drive heavily, or that Riseholme was not at the moment agape to receive the signs of her favour. She must not even confess it to herself, and she made a rapid and complete *volte face*.

"It shall be as you like, *caro*," she said. "You would prefer to spend a quiet day here, so you shall. As for me, you've never known me yet otherwise than busy, have you? I have a stack of letters to write, and there's

my piano looking, oh, so reproachfully at me, for I haven't touched the dear keys since I came, and I must just glance through 'Henry VIII,' as we're going to see it to-morrow. I shall be busy enough, and you will have your day in the sun and the air. I only thought you might prefer to run up to town to-day, instead of waiting till to-morrow. Now don't keep me chatting here any longer."

Lucia proved her quality on that dismal day. She played her piano with all her usual concentration, she read 'Henry VIII,' she wrote her letters, and it was not till the *Evening Gazette* came in that she allowed herself a moment's relaxation. Hurriedly she turned the pages, stopping neither for cross-word nor record of international interests, till she came to Hermione's column. She had feared (and with a gasp of relief she saw how unfounded her fears had been) that Hermione would have devoted his picturesque pen to Olga and the Princess, and given her and her party only the fag-end of his last paragraph, but she had disquieted herself in vain. Olga had taken no notice of him, and now (what could be fairer?) he took no notice of Olga. He just mentioned that she had a 'pretty little cottage' at Riseholme, where she came occasionally for week-ends, and there where three long sumptuous paragraphs of about The Hurst, and Mr. and Mrs. Philip Lucas who had Lord Limpsfield and the wife of the member, Mrs. Garroby-Ashton, and Mrs. Alingsby staying with them. Lady Ambermere and her party from the Hall had come to tea, and it was all glorious and distinguished. Hermione had proved himself a true friend, and there was not a word about Olga and the Princess going to lunch with Georgie, or about Daisy and her absurd weedj. . . . Lucia read the luscious lines through twice, and then, as she often did, sent her copy across to Georgie, in order to help him to readjust values. Almost simultaneously

Daisy sent de Vere across to him with her copy, and Mrs. Boucher did the same, calling attention to the obnoxious paragraphs with blue^d and red pencil respectively, and a great many exclamation marks in both cases.

Riseholme settled back into its strenuous life again when Lucia departed next morning to resume her vapid existence in London. It was not annoyed with her any more, because it had 'larned' her, and was quite prepared to welcome her back if (and when) she returned in a proper spirit and behaved herself suitably. Moreover, even with its own perennial interests to attend to, it privately missed the old Lucia, who gave them a lead in everything, even though she domineered, and was absurd, and pretended to know all about everything, and put her finger into every pie within reach. But it did not miss the new shingled Lucia, the one who had come down with a party of fresh friends, and had laughed at the Museum, and had neglected her old friends altogether, till she found out that Olga and a Princess were in the place: the less seen of her the better. It was considered also that she had remained down here this extra day in order to propitiate those whom she had treated as pariahs, and condescend to take notice of them again, and if there was one thing that Riseholme could not stand, and did not mean to stand from anybody, it was condescension. It was therefore perfectly correct for Daisy and Mrs. Boucher to say they were engaged for lunch, and for Georgie⁷ to decline to ask her to dinner. . . . These three formed the committee of the Museum, and they met that morning to audit the accounts for the week and discuss any⁶ other business connected or unconnected with their office. There was not, of course, with so small and intimate a⁵ body, any need to have a chairman,

and they all rapped the table when they wanted to be listened to.

Mrs. Boucher was greedily counting the shillings which had been taken from the till, while Georgie counted the counterfoils of the tickets.

"A hundred and twenty-three," he said. "That's nearly the best week we've had yet."

"And fifteen and four is nineteen," said Mrs. Boucher, "and four is twenty-three which makes exactly six pounds three shillings. Well, I do call that good. And I hear we've had a wonderful bequest made. Most generous of our dear Olga. I think she ought not only to be thanked, but asked to join the committee. I always said——"

Daisy rapped the table.

"Abfou said just the same," she interrupted. "I had a sitting this morning, and he kept writing 'committee.' I brought the paper along with me, because I was going to propose that myself. But there's another thing first, and that's about Insurance. Robert told me he was insuring the building and its contents separately for a thousand pounds each. We shall have to pay a premium, of course. Oh, here's Abfou's message. 'Committee,' you see 'committee' written three times. I feel quite sure he meant Olga."

"He spells it with only one 'm,'" said Georgie, "but I expect he means that. There's one bit of business that comes before that, for I have been offered another object for the Museum, and I said I would refer the offer to the Committee before I accepted it. Lucia came to see me yesterday morning and asked——"

"The Elizabethan spit," said Mrs. Boucher. "I don't see what we want with it, for my part, and if I had to say what I thought, I should thank her most politely, and beg that she would keep it herself. Most kind of her, I'm sure. Sorry to refuse, which was just what I

said when she asked me to lunch yesterday. There'd have been legs of cold chickens of which her friends from London had eaten wings."

"She asked me too," said Daisy, "and I said 'no.' Did she leave this morning?"

"Yes, about half past ten," said Georgie. "She wanted me to ask her to dinner last night."

Daisy had been writing 'committee' again and again on her blotting paper. It looked very odd with two 'm's' and she would certainly have spelt it with one herself.

"I think Abfou is right about the way to spell 'committee,'" she said, "and even if he weren't the meaning is clear enough. But about the insurance. Robert only advises insurance against fire, for he says no burglar in his senses——"

Mrs. Boucher rapped the table.

"But there wasn't the manuscript of 'Lucrezia' then," she said. "And I should think that any burglar whether in his senses or out of them would think *that* worth taking. If it was a question of insuring an Elizabethan spit——"

"Well, I want to know what the committee wishes me to say about that," said Georgie. "Oh, by the way, when we have a new edition of the catalogue, we must bring it up to date. There'll be the manuscript of 'Lucrezia.'"

"And if you ask me," said Mrs. Boucher, "she only wanted to get rid of the spit because it makes her chimney smoke. Tell her to get her chimney swept and keep the spit."

"There's a portrait of her in the music-room," said Georgie, "by Sigismund. It looks like nothing at all——"

"Of course everybody has a right to have their hair shingled," said Mrs. Boucher, "whatever their age, and there's no law to prevent you."

Daisy rapped the table.

"We were considering as to whether we should ask Mrs. Shuttleworth to join the committee," she said.

"She sang too, beautifully, on Sunday night," said Georgie, "and what fun we had dancing. Oh, and Lucia asked for the Princess's book to sign her name in, and the only book she had brought was a book of cross-word puzzles."

"No!" said both ladies together.

"She did, because Olga's parlour-maid told Foljambe, and——"

"Well I never!" said Daisy. "That served her out. Did she write Lucia across, and Pepino down?"

"I'm sure I've nothing to say against her," said Mrs. Boucher, "but people usually get what they deserve. Certainly let us have the Museum insured if that's the right thing to do, and as for asking Olga to be on the committee, why we settled that hours ago, and I have nothing more to say about the spit. Have the spit if you like, but I would no more think of insuring it, than insuring a cold in the head. I've as much use for one as the other. All that stuff too about the gracious chatelaine at The Hurst in the *Evening Gazette*! My husband read it, and what he said was 'Faugh!' Tush and faugh, was what he said."

Public opinion was beginning to boil up again about Lucia, and Georgie intervened.

"I think that's all the business before the meeting," he said, "and so we accept the manuscript of 'Lucrezia' and decline the spit. I'm sure it was very kind of both the donors. And Olga's to be asked to join the committee. Well, we have got through a good morning's work."

Lucia meanwhile was driving back to London, where

she intended to make herself a busy week. There would be two nights at the opera, on the second of which Olga was singing in "The Valkyrie," and so far from intending to depreciate her singing, or to refrain from going, by way of revenge for the slight she had suffered, she meant, even if Olga sang like a screech-owl and acted like a stick, to say there had never been so perfect a presentation of Brunhilde. She could not conceive doing anything so stupid as snubbing Olga because she had not come to her house or permitted her to enter Old Place: that would have been the height of folly.

At present, she was (or hoped to be) on the upward road, and the upward road could only be climbed by industry and appreciation. When she got to the top, it would be a different matter, but just now it was an asset, a score to allude to dear Olga and the hoppings in and out that took place all day at Riseholme: she knew too, a good deal that Olga had done on Sunday and that would all be useful. "Always appreciate, always admire," thought Lucia to herself as she woke Pepino up from a profound nap on their arrival at Brompton Square. "Be busy: work, work, work."

She knew already that there would be hard work in front of her before she got where she wanted to get, and she whisked off like a disturbing fly which impeded concentration the slight disappointment which her weekend had brought. If you meant to progress, you must never look back (the awful example of Lot's wife!) and never, unless you are certain it is absolutely useless, kick down a ladder which has brought you anywhere, or might in the future bring you anywhere. Already she had learned a lesson about that, for if she had only told Georgie that she had been coming down for a weekend, and had bidden him to lunch and dinner and anything else he liked, he would certainly have got Olga

to pop in at The Hurst, or have said that he couldn't dine with Olga on that fateful Sunday night because he was dining with her, and then no doubt Olga would have asked them all to come in afterwards. It had been a mistake to kick Riseholme down, a woeful mistake, and she would never do such a thing again. It was a mistake also to be sarcastic about anybody till you were sure they could not help you, and who could be sure of that? Even poor dear Daisy with her ridiculous Abfou had proved such an attraction at Old Place, that Georgie had barely time to get back and dress for dinner, and a benignant Daisy instead of a militant and malignant Daisy would have helped. Everything helps, thought Lucia, as she snatched up the tablets which stood by the telephone and recorded the ringings up that had taken place in her absence.

She fairly gasped at the amazing appropriateness of a message that had been received only ten minutes ago. Marcia Whitby hoped that she could dine that evening: the message was to be delivered as soon as she arrived. Obviously it was a last moment invitation: somebody had thrown her over, and perhaps that made them thirteen. There was no great compliment in it, for Marcia, so Lucia conjectured, had already tried high and low to get another woman, and now in despair she tried Lucia . . . Of course there were the tickets for 'Henry VIII,' and it was a first night, but perhaps she could get somebody to go with Pepino. . . . Ah, she remembered Aggie Sanderson lamenting that she had been able to secure a seat! Without a pause she rang up the Duchess of Whitby, and expressed her eager delight at coming to dine to-night. So lucky, so charmed. Then having committed herself, she rang up Aggie and hoped for the best, and Aggie jumped at the idea of a ticket for Henry VIII, and then she told Pepino all about it.

"*Caro*, I had to be kind," she said, tripping off into the music-room where he was at tea. "Poor Marcia Whitby in despair."

"Dear me, what has happened?" asked Pepino.

"One short, one woman short, evidently, for her dinner to-night: besought me to go. But you shall have your play all the same, and a dear sweet woman to take to it. Guess! No. I'll tell you: Aggie. She was longing to go, and so it's a kindness all round. You will have somebody more exciting to talk to than your poor old *sposa*, and dearest Aggie will get her play, and Marcia will be ever so grateful to me. I shall miss the play, but I will go another night unless you tell me it is no good. . . ."

Of course the *Evening Gazette* would contain no further news of the chatelaine at The Hurst, but Lucia turned to Hermione's column with a certain eagerness, for there might be something about the duchess's dinner this evening. Hermione did not seem to have heard of it, but if Hermione came to lunch to-morrow, he would hear of it then. She rang him up. . .

Lucia's kindness to Marcia Whitby met with all sorts of rewards. She got there, as was her custom in London, rather early, so that she could hear the names of all the guests as they arrived, and Marcia, feeling thoroughly warm-hearted to her, for she had tried dozens of women to turn her party from thirteen into fourteen, called her Lucia instead of Mrs. Lucas. It was no difficulty to Lucia to reciprocate this intimacy in a natural manner, for she had alluded to the duchess as Marcia behind her back, for weeks, and now the syllables tripped to her tongue with the familiarity of custom.

"Sweet of you to ask me, dear Marcia," she said. "Pepino and I only arrived from Riseholme an hour or two ago, and he took Aggie Sandeman to the theatre

instead of me. Such a lovely Sunday at Riseholme: you must spare a week-end and come down and vegetate. Olga Shuttleworth was there with Princess Isabel, and she sang too divinely on Sunday evening, and then, would you believe it, we turned on the gramophone and danced."

"What a coincidence!" said Marcia, "because I've got a small dance to-night, and Princess Isabel is coming. But not nearly so chic as your dance at Riseholme."

She moved towards the door to receive the guests who were beginning to arrive, and Lucia with ears open for distinguished names, had just a moment's qualm for having given the impression which she meant to give, that she had been dancing to Olga's gramophone. It was no more than momentary, and presently the Princess arrived, and was led round by her hostess, to receive curtsies.

"And of course you know Mrs. Lucas," said Marcia. "She's been telling me about your dancing to the gramophone at her house on Sunday."

Lucia recovered from her curtsy.

"No, dear Marcia," she said. "It was at Olga's, in fact——"

The Princess fixed her with a royal eye before she passed on, as if she seemed to understand.

But that was the only catastrophe, and how small a one! The Princess liked freaks, and so Marcia had asked a star of the movies and a distinguished novelist, and a woman with a skin like a kipper from having crossed the Sahara twice on foot, or having swum the Atlantic twice, or something of the sort, and a society caricaturist and a slim young gentleman with a soft voice, who turned out to be the bloodiest pugilist of the century, and the Prime Minister, two ambassadors, and the great Mrs. Beaucourt who had just astounded the world by her scandalous volume of purely imaginary reminiscences.

Each of these would furnish a brilliant centre for a dinner party, and the idea of spreading the butter as thick as that seemed to Lucia almost criminal : she herself, indeed, was the only bit of bread to be seen anywhere. Before dinner was over she had engaged both her neighbours, the pugilist and the cinema star, to dine with her on consecutive nights next week, and was mentally running through her list of friends to settle whom to group round them. Alf Watson, the pugilist, it appeared, when not engaged in knocking people out, spent his time in playing the flute to soothe his savage breast, while Marcelle Periscope when not impersonating impassioned lovers, played with his moderately tame lion-cub. Lucia begged Alf to bring his flute, and they would have some music, but did not extend her invitation to the lion-cub, which sounded slightly Bolshevistic. . . . Later in the evening she got hold of Herbert Alton, the social caricaturist, who promised to lunch on Sunday, but failed to do business with the lady from the Sahara, who was leaving next day to swim another sea, or cross another desert. Then the guests for the dance began to arrive, and Lucia, already half-intoxicated by celebrities, sank rapt in a chair at the top of the staircase and listened to the catalogue of sonorous names. Up trooped stars and garters and tiaras, and when she felt stronger, she clung firmly to Lord Limpsfield, who seemed to know everybody and raked in introductions.

Lucia did not get home till three o'clock (for having given up her play out of kindness to Marcia, she might as well do it thoroughly), but she was busy writing invitations for her two dinner parties next week by nine in the morning. Pepino was lunching at his club, where he might meet the Astronomer Royal, and have a chat about the constellations, but he was to ring her up about a quarter past two and ascertain if she had made any

engagement for him during the afternoon. The idea of this somehow occupied her brain as she filled up the cards of invitation in her small exquisite handwriting. There was a telephone in her dining-room, and she began to visualise to herself Pepino's ringing her up, while she and the two or three friends who were lunching with her would be still at table. It would be at the end of lunch: they would be drinking their coffee, which she always made herself in a glass machine with a spirit-lamp which, when it appeared to be on the point of exploding, indicated that coffee was ready. The servants would have left the room, and she would go to the telephone herself. . . . She would hear Pepino's voice, but nobody else would. They would not know who was at the other end, and she might easily pretend that it was not Pepino, but . . . She would give a gabbling answer, audible to her guests, but she could divert her mouth a little away so that Pepino could not make anything out of it, and then hang up the receiver again. . . . Pepino no doubt would think he had got hold of a wrong number, and presently call her up again, and she would then tell him anything there was to communicate. As she scribbled away the idea took shape and substance: there was an attraction about it, it smiled on her.

She came to the end of her dinner-invitations grouped round the cinema-star and the fluting prize-fighter, and she considered whom to ask to meet Herbert Alton on Sunday. He was working hard, he had told her, to finish his little gallery of caricatures with which he annually regaled London, and which was to open in a fortnight. He was a licensed satirist, and all London always flocked to his show to observe with glee what he made of them all, and what witty and pungent little remarks he affixed to their monstrous effigies. It was a distinct *cachet*, too, to be caricatured by him, a sign that you

attracted attention and were a notable figure. He might (in fact, he always did) make you a perfect guy, and his captions invariably made fun of something characteristic, but it gave you publicity. She wondered whether he would take a commission: she wondered whether he might be induced to do a caricature of Pepino or herself or of them both, at a handsome price, with the proviso that it was to be on view at his exhibition. That could probably be ascertained, and then she might approach the subject on Sunday. Anyhow, she would ask one or two pleasant people to meet him, and hope for the best.

Lucia's little lunch-party that day consisted only of four people. Lunch, Lucia considered, was for *intimes*: you sat with your elbows on the table, and all talked together, and learned the news, just as you did on the Green at Riseholme. There was something unwieldy about a large lunch-party; it was a distracted affair, and in the effort to assimilate more news than you could really digest, you forgot half of it. To-day, therefore, there was only Aggie Sandeman who had been to the play last night with Pepino, and was bringing her cousin Adèle Brixton (whom Lucia had not yet met, but very much wanted to know), and Stephen Merriall. Lady Brixton was a lean, intelligent American of large fortune who found she got on better without her husband. But as Lord Brixton preferred living in America and she in England, satisfactory arrangements were easily made. Occasionally she had to go to see relatives in America, and he selected such periods for seeing relatives in England.

She explained the situation very good-naturedly to Lucia who rather rashly asked after her husband.

"In fact," she said, "we blow kisses to each other

from the decks of Atlantic liners going in opposite directions, if it's calm, and if it's rough, we're sick into the same ocean."

Now that would never have been said at Riseholme, or if it was, it would have been very ill thought of, and a forced smile followed by a complete change of conversation would have given it a chilly welcome. Now, out of habit, Lucia smiled a forced smile, and then remembered that you could not judge London by the chaste standards of Riseholme. She turned the forced smile into a genial one.

"Too delicious!" she said. "I must tell Pepino that."

"Pep what?" asked Lady Brixton.

This was explained; it was also explained that Aggie had been with Pepino to the play last night; in fact there was rather too much explanation going on for social ease, and Lucia thought it was time to tell them all about what she had done last night. She did this in a characteristic manner.

"Dear Lady Brixton," she said, "ever since you came in I've been wondering where I have seen you. Of course it was last night, at our darling Marcia's dance."

This seemed to introduce the desirable topic, and though it was not in the least true, it was a wonderfully good shot.

"Yes, I was there," said Adele. "What a crush. Sheer Mormonism: one man to fifty women."

"How unkind of you! I dined there first; quite a small party. Princess Isabel, who had been down at our dear little Riseholme on Sunday, staying with Olga—such a coincidence——" Lucia stopped just in time; she was about to describe the impromptu dance at Olga's on Sunday night, but remembered that Stephen knew she had not been to it. So she left the coincidence alone, and went rapidly on:

“ Dear Marcia insisted on my coming,” she said, “ and so, really, like a true friend I gave up the play and went. Such an amusing little dinner. Marcelle—Marcelle Periscope, the Prime Minister and the Italian ambassadress, and Princess Isabel of course, and Alf, and a few more. There’s nobody like Marcia for getting up a wonderful unexpected little party like that. Alf was too delicious.”

“ Not Alf Watson ? ” asked Lady Brixton.

“ Yes, I sat next him at dinner, and he’s coming to dine with me next week, and is bringing his flute. He adores playing the flute. Can’t I persuade you to come, Lady Brixton ? Thursday, let me see, is it Thursday ? Yes, Thursday. No party at all, just a few old friends, and some music. I must find some duets for the piano and flute : Alf made me promise that I would play his accompaniments for him. And Dora : Dora Beaucourt. What a lurid life ! And Sigismund : no, I don’t think Sigismund was there ; it was at Sophy’s. Such a marvellous portrait he has done of me : is it not marvellous, Stephen ? You remember it down at Riseholme. How amusing Sophy was, insisting that I should move every other picture out of my music room. I must get her to come in after dinner on Thursday ; there is something primitive about the flute.” So Theocritan !

Lucia suddenly remembered that she mustn’t kick ladders down, and turned to Aggie. Aggie had been very useful when first she came up to London, and she might quite easily be useful again, for she knew quantities of solid people, and if her parties lacked brilliance, they were highly respectable. The people whom Sophy called ‘ the old crusted ’ went there.

“ Aggie dear, as soon as you get home, put down Wednesday for dining with me,” she said, “ and if there’s an engagement there already, as there’s sure to be, cross it out and have pseudo-influenza. Marcelle—Marcelle Periscope

is coming, but I didn't ask the lion-cub. A lion-cub: so quaint of him—and who else was there last night? Dear me, I get so mixed up with all the people one runs across."

Lucia, of course, never got mixed up at all: there was no one so clear-headed, but she had to spin things out a little, for Pepino was rather late ringing up. The coffee-equipage had been set before her, and she kept drawing away the spirit-lamp in an absent manner just before it boiled, for they must still be sitting in the dining-room when he rang up. But even as she lamented her muddled memory, the tinkle of the telephone bell sounded. She rapidly rehearsed in her mind what she was going to say.

"Ah, that telephone," she said, rising hastily, so as to get to it before one of the servants came back. "I often tell Pepino I shall cut it out of the house, for one never gets a moment's peace. Yes, yes, who is it?"

Lucia listened for a second, and then gave a curtsey.

"Oh, is it you, ma'am?" she said, holding the mouth-piece a little obliquely. "Yes, I'm Mrs. Lucas."

A rather gruff noise, clearly Pepino's voice, came from the instrument, but she trusted it was inaudible to the others, and she soon broke in again talking very rapidly.

"Oh, that is kind of you, your Highness," she said. "It would be too delightful. To-morrow: charmed. Delighted."

She replaced the mouth-piece, and instantly began to talk again from the point at which she had left off.

"Yes, and of course Herbert Alton was there," she said. "His show opens in a fortnight, and how we shall all meet there at the private view and laugh at each other's caricatures! What is it that Rousseau—is it Rousseau? says, about our not being wholly grieved at the misfortunes of our friends? So true! Bertie is rather wicked sometimes

though, but still one forgives him everything. Ah, the coffee is boiling at last."

Pepino, as Lucia had foreseen, rang up again almost immediately, and she told him he had missed the most charming little lunch party, because he would go to his club. Her guests, of course, were burning to know to whom she had curtsied, but Lucia gave no information on the point. Adele Brixton and Aggie presently went off to a matinee, but Stephen remained behind. That looked rather well, Lucia thought, for she had noticed that often a handsome and tolerably young man lingered with the hostess when other guests had gone. There was something rather *chic* about it; if it happened very constantly, or if at another house they came together or went away together, people would begin to talk, quite pleasantly of course, about his devotion to her. Georgie had been just such a *cavaliere servente*. Stephen, for his part, was quite unconscious of any such scintillations in Lucia's mind: he merely knew that it was certainly convenient for an unattached man to have a very pleasant house always to go to, where he would be sure of hearing things that interested Hermione.

"Delicious little lunch party," he said. "What a charming woman Lady Brixton is."

"Dear Adele," said Lucia dreamily. "Charming, isn't she? How pleased she was at the thought of meeting Alf! Do look in after dinner that night, Stephen, I wish I could ask you to dine, but I expect to be crammed as it is. Dine on Wednesday, though: let me see, Marcelle comes that night. What a rush next week will be!"

Stephen waited for her to allude to the voice to which she had curtsied, but he waited in vain.