

CHAPTER IX

POOR Pepino's cold next day, instead of being better, was a good deal worse. He had aches and pains, and felt feverish, and sent for the doctor, who peremptorily ordered him to go to bed. There was nothing in the least to cause alarm, but it would be the height of folly to go to any week-end party at all. Bed.

Pepino telegraphed to Lady Brixton with many regrets for the unavoidable, and rang up Lucia. The state of his voice made it difficult to catch what he said, but she quite understood that there was nothing to be anxious about, and that he hoped she would go to Adele's without him. Her voice on the other hand was marvellously distinct, and he heard a great deal about the misfortunes which had come to so brilliant a conclusion last night. There followed a string of seven christian names, and Lucia said a flashlight photograph had been permitted during supper. She thought she was in it, though rather in the background.

Lucia was very sorry for Pepino's indisposition, but, as ordered, had no anxiety about him. She felt too, that he wouldn't personally miss very much by being prevented from coming to Adele's party, for it was to be a very large party, and Pepino—bless him—occasionally got a little dazed at these brilliant gatherings. He did not grasp who people were with the speed and certainty which were needful, and he had been known to

grasp the hand of an eminent author and tell him how much he had admired his fine picture at the Academy. (Lucia constantly did that sort of thing herself, but then she got herself out of the holes she had herself dugged with so brilliant a manœuvre that it didn't matter, whereas Pepino was only dazed the more by his misfortunes.) Moreover she knew that Pepino's presence somehow hampered her style: she could not be the brilliant mondaine, when his patient but proud eye was on her, with quite the dash that was hers when he was not there. There was always the sense that he knew her best in her Riseholme incarnation, in her duets with Georgie, and her rendering of the slow movement of the Moonlight Sonata, and her grabbing of all Daisy's little stunts. She electrified him as the superb butterfly, but the electrification was accompanied by slight shocks and surprises. When she referred by her christian name to some woman with whom her only bond was that she had refused to dine at Brompton Square, that puzzled Pepino. . . . In the autumn she must be a little more serious, have some quiet dinner parties of ordinary people, for really up till now there had scarcely been an 'ordinary' person at Brompton Square at all, such noble lions of every species had been entrapped there. And Adele's party was to be of a very leonine kind; the smart world was to be there, and some highbrows and some politicians, and she was aware that she herself would have to do her very best, and be allusive, and pretend to know what she didn't know, and seem to swim in very distinguished currents. Dear Pepino wasn't up to that sort of thing, he couldn't grapple with it, and she grappled with it best without him. . . . At the moment of that vainglorious thought, it is probable that Nemesis fixed her inexorable eye on Lucia.

Lucia unconscious of this deadly scrutiny turned to

her immediate affairs. Her engagement-book pleasantly informed her that she had many things to do on the day when the need for complete rest overtook her, and now she heralded through the telephone the glad tidings that she could lunch here and drop in there, and dine with Aggie. All went well with these restorations, and the day would be full, and to-morrow also, down to the hour of her departure for Adele's. Having despatched this agreeable business, she was on the point of ringing up Stephen, to fit him in for the spare three-quarters of an hour that was left, when she was rung up and it was Stephen's voice that greeted her.

"*Stephano mio,*" she said. "How did you guess I was back?"

"Because I rang up Riseholme first," said he, "and heard you had gone to town. Were you there last night?"

There was no cause to ask where "there" was. There had only been one place in London last night.

"Yes; delicious dance," said Lucia. "I was just going to ring you up and see if you could come round for a chat at 4.45, I am free till 5.30. Such fun it was. A flashlight photograph."

"No!" said Stephen in the Riseholme manner. "I long to hear about it. And were there really seven of them?"

"Quite" said Lucia magnificently.

"Wonderful! But 4.45 is no use for me. Can't you give me another time?"

"My dear, impossible," said Lucia. "You know what London is in these last days. Such a scrimmage."

"Well, we shall meet to-morrow then," said he.

"But, alas, I go to Adele's to-morrow," she said.

"Yes, but so do I," said Stephen. "She asked me this morning. I was wondering if you would drive me

down, if you're going in your car. Would there be room for you and Pepino and me?"

Lucia rapidly reviewed the situation. It was perfectly clear to her that Adele had asked Stephen, at the last moment, to fill Pepino's place. But naturally she had not told him that, and Lucia determined not to do so either. It would spoil his pleasure (at least it would have spoiled hers) to know that. . . . And what a wonderful entry it would make for her—rather daring—to drive down alone with her lover. She could tell him about Pepino's indisposition to-morrow, as if it had just occurred.

"Yes, Stephano, heaps of room," she said. "Delighted. I'll call for you, shall I, on my way down, soon after three."

"Angelic," he said. "What fun we shall have."

And it is probable that Nemesis at that precise moment licked her dry lips. 'Fun!' thought Nemesis.

Marcia Whitby was of the party. She went down in the morning, and lunched alone with Adele. Their main topic of conversation was obvious.

"I saw her announcement in the *Morning Post*," said the infuriated Marcia, "that she had gone for a few days complete rest into the country, and naturally I thought I was safe. I was determined she shouldn't come to my ball, and when I saw that, I thought she couldn't. So out of sheer good nature I sent her a card, so that she could tell everybody she had been asked. Never did I dream that there was a possibility of her coming. Instead of which, she made the most conspicuous entry that she could have made. I believe she timed it: I believe she waited on the stairs till she saw we were going down to supper."

"I wonder!" said Adele. "Genius, if it was that."

She curtsied seven times, too. I can't do that without loud cracks from my aged knees."

"And she stopped till the very end," said Marcia. "She was positively the last to go. I shall never do a kind thing again."

"You're horrid about her," said Adele. "Besides, what has she done? You asked her and she came. You don't rave at your guests for coming when they're asked. You wouldn't like it if none of them came."

"That's different," said Marcia. "I shouldn't wonder if she announced she was ordered complete rest in order that I should fall into her trap."

Adele sighed, but shook her head.

"Oh, my dear, that *would* have been magnificent," she said. "But I'm afraid I can't hope to believe that. I daresay she went into the country because you hadn't asked her, and that was pretty good. But the other: no. However, we'll ask Tony what he thinks."

"What's Tony got to do with it?" said Marcia.

"Why, he's even more wrapped up in her than I am," said Adele. "He thinks of nothing else."

Marcia was silent a moment. Then a sort of softer gleam came into her angry eye.

"Tell me some more about her," she said.

Adele clapped her hands.

"Ah, that's splendid," she said. "You're beginning to feel kinder. What we would do without our Lucia I can't imagine. I don't know what there would be to talk about."

"She's ridiculous!" said Marcia relapsing a little.

"No, you mustn't feel that," said Adele. "You mustn't laugh at her ever. You must just richly enjoy her."

"She's a snob!" said Marcia, as if this was a tremendous discovery.

“So am I: so are you: so are we all,” said Adele. “We all run after distinguished people like—like Alf and Marcelle. The difference between you and Lucia is entirely in her favour, for you pretend you’re not a snob, and she is perfectly frank and open about it. Besides, what is a duchess like you for except to give pleasure to snobs? That’s your work in the world, darling; that’s why you were sent here. Don’t shirk it, or when you’re old you will suffer agonies of remorse. And you’re a snob too. You liked having seven—or was it seventy?—Royals at your dance.”

“Well, tell me some more about Lucia,” said Marcia, rather struck by this ingenious presentation of the case.

“Indeed I will: I long for your conversion to Lucia-philism. Now to-day there are going to be marvellous happenings. You see Lucia has got a lover——”

“Quite absolutely impossible!” said Marcia firmly.

“Oh, don’t interrupt. Of course he is only an official lover, a public lover, and his name is Stephen Merriall. A perfect lady. Now Pepino, Lucia’s husband, was coming down with her to-day, but he’s got a very bad cold and has put me off. I’m rather glad: Lucia has got more—more dash when he’s not there. So I’ve asked her lover instead——”

“No!” said Marcia. “Go on.”

“My dear, they are much better than any play I have ever seen. They do it beautifully: they give each other little glances and smiles, and then begin to talk hurriedly to someone else. Of course, they’re both as chaste as snow, chaster if possible. I think poor Bah’s case put it into Lucia’s head that in this naughty world it gave a *cachet* to a woman to have the reputation of having a lover. So safe too: there’s nothing to expose. They only behave like lovers strictly in public. I was terrified when it began that Mr. Merriall would think she meant some-

thing, and try to kiss her when they were alone, and so rub the delicate bloom completely off, but I'm sure he's tumbled to it."

"How perfect!" said Marcia.

"Isn't it? Aren't you feeling more Luciaphil? I'm sure you are. You must enjoy her: it shows such a want of humour to be annoyed with her. And really I've taken a great deal of trouble to get people she will revel in. There's the Prime Minister, there's you, there's Greatorex the pianist who's the only person who can play Stravinski, there's Professor Bonstetter the psychoanalyst, there's the Italian Ambassador, there's her lover, there's Tony. . . . I can't go on. Oh, and I must remember to tell her that Archie Singleton is Babs's brother, or she may say something dreadful. And then there are lots who will revel in Lucia, and I the foremost. I'm devoted to her; I am really, Marcia. She's got character, she's got an iron will, and I like strong talkative women so much better than strong silent men."

"Yes, she's got will," said Marcia. "She determined to come to my ball, and she came. I allow I gave her the chance."

"Those are the chances that come to gifted people," said Adele. "They don't come to ordinary people."

"Suppose I flirted violently with her lover?" said Marcia.

Adele's eyes grew bright with thought.

"I can't imagine what she would do," she said. "But I'm sure she would do something that scored. Otherwise she wouldn't be Lucia. But you mustn't do it."

"Just one evening," said Marcia. "Just for an hour or two. It's not poaching, you see, because her lover isn't her lover. He's just a stunt."

Adele wavered.

“ It would be wonderful to know what she would do,” she said. “ And it’s true that he’s only a stunt. . . . Perhaps for an hour or two to-morrow, and then give him back.”

Adele did not expect any of her guests till teatime, and Marcia and she both retired for after-lunch siestas. Adele had been down here for the last four or five days, driving up to Marcia’s ball and back in the very early morning, and had three days before settled everything in connection with her party, assigning rooms, discussing questions of high importance with her chef, and arranging to meet as many trains as possible. It so happened, therefore, that Stephen Merriall, since the house was full, was to occupy the spacious dressing-room, furnished as a bedroom, next Lucia’s room, which had been originally allotted to Pepino. Adele had told her butler that Mr. Lucas was not coming, but that his room would be occupied by Mr. Merriall, thought no more about it, and omitted to substitute a new card on his door. These two rooms were half way down a long corridor of bedrooms and bathrooms that ran the whole length of the house, a spacious oak-boarded corridor, rather dark, with the broad staircase coming up at the end of it. Below was the suite of public rooms, a library at the end, a big music-room, a long gallery of a drawing-room, and the dining-room. These all opened on to a paved terrace overlooking the gardens and tennis courts, and it was here, with the shadow of the house lying coolly across it, that her guests began to assemble. In ones and twos they gathered, some motoring down from London, others arriving by train, and it was not till there were some dozen of them, among whom were the most fervent Luciaphils, that the object of their devotion, attended by her lover, made her appearance, evidently at the top of her form.

"Dearest Adele," she said. "How delicious to get into the cool country again. Marcia dear! Such adventures I had on my way up to your ball: two burst tyres, : I thought I should never get there. How are you, your Excellency? I saw you at the Duchess's, but couldn't get a word with you. Aggie darling! Ah, Lord Tony! Yes, a cup of tea would be delicious; no sugar, Stephen, thanks."

Lucia had not noticed quite everybody. There were one or two people rather retired from the tea-table, but they did not seem to be of much importance, and certainly the Prime Minister was not among them. Stephen hovered, loverlike, just behind her chair, and she turned to the Italian ambassador.

"I was afraid of a motor accident all the way down," she said, "because last night I dreamed I broke a looking-glass. Quaint things dreams are, though really the psycho-analysts who interpret them are quainter. I went to a meeting at Sophy's, dear Sophy Alingsby, the other day—your Excellency I am sure knows Sophy Alingsby—and heard a lecture on it. Let me see: boiled rabbit, if you dream of boiled rabbit——"

Lucia suddenly became aware of a sort of tension. Just a tension. She looked quickly round, and recognised one of the men she had not paid much attention to. She sprang from her chair.

"Professor Bonstetter," she said. "How are you? I know you won't remember me, but I did have the honour of shaking hands with you after your enthralling lecture the other day. Do come and tell his Excellency and me a little more about it. There were so many questions I longed to ask you."

Adele wanted to applaud, but she had to be content with catching Marcia's eye. Was Lucia great, or was she not? Stephen too: how exactly right she was to

hand him her empty cup when she had finished with it, without a word, and how perfectly he took it! "More?" he said, and Lucia just shook her head without withdrawing her attention from Professor Bonstetter. Then the Prime Minister arrived, and she said how lovely Chequers must be looking. She did not annex him, she just hovered and hinted, and made no direct suggestion, and sure enough, within five minutes he had asked her if she knew Chequers. Of course she did, but only as a tourist—and so one thing led on to another. It would be a nice break in her long drive down to Riseholme on Tuesday to lunch at Chequers, and not more than forty miles out of her way.

People dispersed and strolled on the terrace, and gathered again, and some went off to their rooms. Lucia had one little turn up and down with the Ambassador, and spoke with great tact of Mussolini, and another with Lord Tony, and not for a long time did she let Stephen join her. But then they wandered off into the garden, and were seen standing very close together and arguing publicly about a flower, and Lucia seeing they were observed, called to Adele to know if it wasn't Dropmore Borage. They came back very soon, and Stephen went up to his room while Lucia remained downstairs. Adele showed her the library and the music-room, and the long drawing-room, and then vanished. Lucia gravitated to the music-room, opened the piano, and began the slow movement of the Moonlight Sonata.

About half way through it, she became aware that somebody had come into the room. But her eyes were fixed dreamily on the usual point at the edge of the ceiling; and her fingers faultlessly doled out the slow triplets. She gave a little sigh when she had finished, pressed her fingers to her eyes, and slowly awoke, as from some melodious anæsthetic.

It was a man who had come in and who had seated himself not far from the key-board.

"Charming!" he said. "Thank you."

Lucia didn't remember seeing him on the terrace: perhaps he had only just arrived. She had a vague idea, however, that whether on the terrace or elsewhere, she had seen him before. She gave a pretty little start. "Ah, had no idea I had an audience," she said. "I should never have ventured to go on playing. So dreadfully out of practice."

"Please have a little more practice then," said the polite stranger.

She ran her hands, butterfly fashion, over the keys.

"A little morsel of Stravinski?" she said.

It was in the middle of the morsel that Adele came in and found Lucia playing Stravinski to Mr. Greatorex. The position seemed to be away, away beyond her orbit altogether, and she merely waited with undiminished faith in Lucia, to see what would happen when Lucia became aware to whom she was playing. . . . It was a longish morsel, too: more like a meal than a morsel, and it was also remarkably like a muddle. Finally, Lucia made an optimistic attempt at the double chromatic scale in divergent directions which brought it to an end, and laughed gaily.

"My poor fingers," she said. "Delicious piano, dear Adele. I love a Bechstein; that was a little morsel of Stravinski. Hectic perhaps, do you think? But so true to the modern idea: little feverish excursions: little bits of tunes, and nothing worked out. But I always say that there is something in Stravinski, if you study him. How I worked at that little piece, and I'm afraid it's far from perfect yet."

Lucia played one more little run with her right hand, while she cudgelled her brain to remember where she had

seen this man before, and turned round on the music-stool. She felt sure he was an artist of some kind, and she did not want to ask Adele to introduce him, for that would look as if she did not know everybody. She tried pictures next.

"In Art I always think that the Stravinski school is represented by the Post-Cubists," she said. "They give us pattern in lines, just as Stravinski gives us patterns in notes, and the modern poet patterns in words. At Sophy Alingsby's the other night we had a feast of patterns. Dear Sophy—what a curious mixture of tastes! She cares only for the ultra-primitive in music, and the ultra-modern in Art. Just before you came in, Adele, I was trying to remember the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight, those triplets though they look easy have to be kept so level. And yet Sophy considers Beethoven a positive decadent. I ought to have taken her to Diva's little concert—Diva Dalrymple—for I assure you really that Stravinski sounded classical compared to the rest of the programme. It was very creditably played, too. Mr.—" what was his name?—"Mr. Greatorex"

She had actually said the word before her brain made the connection. She gave her little peal of laughter.

"Ah, you wicked people," she cried. "A plot: clearly a plot. Mr. Greatorex, how could you? Adele told you to come in here when she heard me begin my little strummings, and told you to sit down and encourage me. Don't deny it, Adele! I know it was like that. I shall tell everybody how unkind you've been, unless Mr. Greatorex sits down instantly and magically restores to life what I have just murdered."

Adele denied nothing. In fact there was no time to deny anything, for Lucia positively thrust Mr. Greatorex on to the music stool, and instantly put on her rapt

musical face, chin in hand, and eyes looking dreamily upwards. There was Nemesis, you would have thought, dealing thrusts at her, but Nemesis was no match for her amazing quickness. She parried and thrust again, and here—what richness of future reminiscence—was Mr. Greatorex playing Stravinski to her, before no audience but herself and Adele who really didn't count, for the only tune she liked was "Land of Hope and Glory" . . . Great was Lucia!

Adele left the two, warning them that it was getting on for dressing time, but there was some more Stravinski first, for Lucia's sole ear. Adele had told her the direction of her room, and said her name was on the door, and Lucia found it at once. A beautiful room it was, with a bathroom on one side, and a magnificent Charles II bed draped at the back with wool-work tapestry. It was a little late for Lucia's Elizabethan taste, and she noticed that the big wardrobe was Chippendale, which was later still. There was a Chinese paper on the wall, and fine Persian rugs on the floor, and though she could have criticised it was easy to admire. And there for herself was a very smart dress, and for decoration Aunt Amy's pearls, and the Beethoven brooch. But she decided to avoid all possible chance of competition, and put the pearls back into her jewel-case. The Beethoven brooch, she was sure, need fear no rival.

Lucia felt that dinner, as far as she went, was a huge success. Stephen was seated just opposite her, and now and then she exchanged little distant smiles with him. Next her on one side was Lord Tony, who adored her story about Stravinski and Greatorex. She told him also what the Italian Ambassador had said about Mussolini, and the Prime Minister about Chequers: she was going to pop in to lunch on her way down to Riseholme after this delicious party. Then conversation shifted, and she

turned left, and talked to the only man whose identity she had not grasped. But, as matter of public knowledge, she began about poor Babs, and her own admiration of her demeanour at that wicked trial, which had ended so disastrously. And once again there was slight tension.

Bridge and Mah-Jong followed, and rich, allusive conversation and the sense, so dear to Lucia, of being in the very centre of everything that was distinguished. When the women went upstairs she hurried to her room, made a swift change into greater simplicity, and, by invitation, sought out Marcia's room, at the far end of the passage, for a chat. Adele was there, and dear (rather common) Aggie was there, and Aggie was being just a shade sycophantic over the six rows of Whitby pearls. Lucia was glad she had limited her splendours to the Beethoven brooch

"But why didn't you wear your pearls, Lucia?" asked Adele. "I was hoping to see them." (She had heard talk of Aunt Amy's pearls, but had not noticed them on the night of Marcia's ball.)

"My little seedlings!" said Lucia. "Just seedlings, compared to Marcia's marbles. Little trumperies!"

Aggie had seen them, and she knew Lucia did not overstate their minuteness. Like a true Luciaphil, she changed a subject that might prove embarrassing.

"Take away your baubles, Marcia," said Aggie. "They are only diseases of a common shell fish which you eat when it's healthy and wear when it's got a tumour. . . . How wretched it is to think that all of us aren't going to meet day after day as we have been doing! There's Adele going to America, and there's Marcia going to Scotland—what a foul spot, Marcia, come to Marienbad instead with me. And what are you going to do, Lucia?"

"Oh, my dear, how I wanted to go to Aix or

Marienbad," she said. "But my Pepino says it's impossible. We've got to stop quiet at Riseholme. Shekels, tiresome shekels."

"There she goes, talking about Riseholme as if it was some dreadful penance to go there," said Adele. "You adore Riseholme, Lucia, at least if you don't, you ought to. Olga raves about it. She says she's never really happy away from it. When are you going to ask me there?"

"Adele, as if you didn't know that you weren't always welcome," said Lucia.

"Me, too," said Marcia.

"A standing invitation to both of you always," said Lucia. "Dear Marcia, how sweet of you to want to come! I go there on Tuesday, and there I remain. But it's true, I do adore it. No balls, no parties, and such dear Arcadians. You couldn't believe in them without seeing them. Life at its very simplest, dears."

"It can't be simpler than Scotland," said Marcia. "In Scotland you kill birds and fish all day, and eat them at night. That's all."

Lucia through these months of strenuous effort had never perhaps felt herself so amply rewarded as she was at this moment. All evening she had talked in an effortless *deshabille* of mind to the great ones of the country, the noble, the distinguished, the accomplished, and now here she was in a duchess's bedroom having a good-night talk. This was nearer Nirvana than even Marcia's ball. And the three women there seemed to be grouped round her: they waited—there was no mistaking it—listening for something from her, just as Riseholme used to wait for her lead. She felt that she was truly attaining, and put her chin in her hand and looked a little upwards.

"I shall get tremendously put in my place when I go

back to Riseholme again," she said. "I'm sure Riseholme thinks I have been wasting my time in idle frivolities. It sees perhaps in an evening paper that I have been to Aggie's party, or Adele's house or Marcia's ball, and I assure you it will be very suspicious of me. Just as if I didn't know that all these delightful things were symbols."

Adele had got the cataleptic look of a figure in a stained glass window, so rapt she was. But she wanted to grasp this with full appreciation.

"Lucia, don't be so dreadfully clever," she said. "You're talking high over my head: you're like the whirr of an aeroplane. Explain what you mean by symbols."

Lucia was toying with the string of Whitby pearls, which Marcia still held, with one hand. The other she laid on Adele's knee. She felt that a high line was expected of her.

"My dear, you know," she said "All our runnings-about, all our gaities are symbols of affection: we love to see each other because we partake of each other. Interesting people, distinguished people, obscure people, ordinary people, we long to bring them all into our lives in order to widen our horizons. We learn, or we try to learn of other interests beside our own. I shall have to make Riseholme understand that dear little Alf, playing the flute at my house, or half a dozen princes eating quails at Marcia's mansion, it's all the same, isn't it? We get to know the point of view of prize-fighters and princes. And it seems to me, it seems to me——"

Lucia's gaze grew a shade more lost and aloof.

"It seems to me that we extend our very souls," she said, "by letting them flow into other lives. How badly I put it! But when Eric Greatorex—so charming of him

—played those delicious pieces of Stravinski to me before dinner, I felt I was stepping over some sort of frontier *into* Stravinski. Eric made out my passport. A multiplication of experience : I think that is what I mean.”

None of those present could have said with any precision what Lucia had meant, but the general drift seemed to be that an hour with a burglar or a cannibal was valuable for the amplification of the soul.

“Odd types too,” she said. “How good for one to be put into touch with something quite remote. Marcelle—Marcelle Periscope—you met him at my house, didn’t you, Aggie——”

“Why wasn’t I asked ? ” said Marcia.

Lucia gave a little quick smile, as at some sweet child’s interruption.

“Darling Marcia, why didn’t you propose yourself ? Surely you know me well enough to do that. Yes, Marcelle, a cinema-artist. A fresh horizon, a fresh attitude towards life. So good for me : it helps me not to be narrow. *Dio mio* ! how I pray I shall never be narrow. To be shocked, too ! How shocking to be shocked. If you all had fifty lovers apiece, I should merely think it a privilege to know about them all.”

Marcia longed, with almost the imperativeness of a longing to sneeze, to allude directly to Stephen. She raised her eyes for a half second to Adele, the priestess of this cult in which she knew she was rapidly becoming a worshipper, but if ever an emphatic negative was wordlessly bawled at a tentative enquirer, it was bawled now. If Lucia chose to say anything about Stephen it would indeed be manna, but to ask—never ! Aggie, seated sideways to them, had not seen this telegraphy, and spoke unwisely with her lips.

“If an ordinary good-looking woman,” she said, “tells me that she hasn’t got a lover or a man who wants

to be her lover, I always say ' You lie ! ' So she does. You shall begin, Lucia, about your lovers."

Nothing could have been more unfortunate. Adèle could have hurled the entire six rows of the Whitby pearls at Aggie's face. Lucia had no lover, but only the wraith of a lover, on whom direct light must never be flashed. Such a little reflection should have shown Aggie that. The effect of her carelessness was that Lucia became visibly embarrassed, looked at the clock, and got up in a violent hurry.

" Good gracious me ! " she said. " What a time of night ! Who could have thought that our little chat had lasted so long ? Yes, dear Adele, I know my room, on the left with my name on the door. Don't dream of coming to show it me."

Lucia distributed little pressures and kisses and clings, and holding her very smart pale blue wrapper close about her, slid noiselessly out in her slippers into the corridor. It was late, the house was quite quiet, for a quarter of an hour ago they had heard the creaking of men's footsteps going to their rooms. The main lights had been put out, only here and there down the long silent aisle there burned a single small illumination. Past half a dozen doors Lucia tiptoed, until she came to one on which she could just see the name Philip Lucas preceded by a dim hieroglyph which of course was " Mrs. " She turned the handle and went in.

Two yards in front of her, by the side of the bed, was standing Stephen, voluptuous in honey-coloured pyjamas. For one awful second—for she felt sure this was her room (*and so did he*)—they stared at each other in dead silence.

" How dare you ? " said Stephen, so agitated that he could scarcely form the syllables.

“ And how dare *you* ? ” hissed Lucia. “ Go out of my room instantly.”

“ Go out of mine ! ” said Stephen.

Lucia's indignant eye left his horror-stricken face and swept round the room. There was no Chinese paper on the wall, but a pretty Morris paper : there was no Charles II bed with tapestry, but a brass-testered couch ; there was no Chippendale wardrobe, but something useful from Tottenham Court Road. She gave one little squeal, of a pitch between the music of the slate-pencil and of the bat, and closed his door again. She staggered on to the next room where again the legend ‘ Philip Lucas ’ was legible, popped in, and locked the door. She hurried to the door of communication between this and the fatal chamber next it, and as she locked that also she heard from the other side of it the bolt violently pulled forward.

She sat down on her bed in a state of painful agitation. Her excursion into the fatal chamber had been an awful, a hideous mistake : none knew that better than herself, but how was she to explain that to her lover ? For weeks they had been advertising the guilt of their blameless relationship, and now it seemed to her impossible ever to resume it. Every time she gave Stephen one of those little smiles or glances, at which she had become so perfect an adept, there would start into her mind that moment of speechless horror, and her smile would turn to a tragic grimace, and her sick glance recoil from him. Worse than that, how was she ever to speak of it to him, or passionately protest her innocence ? He had thought that she had come to his room (indeed she had) when the house was quiet, on the sinister errand of love, and though, when he had repudiated her, she had followed suit, she saw the recoiling indignation of her lover. If only, just now, she had kept her head, if only she had said at once, ‘ I beg

your pardon, I mistook my room,' all might have been well, but how nerve herself to say it afterwards? And in spite of the entire integrity of her moral nature, which was puritanical to the verge of prudishness, she had not liked (no woman could) his unfeigned horror at her irruption.

Stephen next door was in little better plight. He had had a severe shock. For weeks Lucia had encouraged him to play the lover, and had (so he awfully asked himself) this pleasant public stunt become a reality to her, a need of her nature? She had made it appear, when he so rightly repulsed her, that she had come to his room by mistake, but was that pretence? Had she really come with a terrible motive? It was her business, anyhow, to explain, and insist on her innocence, if she was innocent, and he would only be too thankful to believe her. But at present and without that, the idea of resuming the public loverlike demeanour was frankly beyond him. She might be encouraged again. . . . Though now he was safe with locked and bolted doors, he knew he would not be able to sleep, and he took a large dose of aspirin.

Lucia was far more thorough: she never shelved difficulties, but faced them. She still sat on the edge of her bed, long after Stephen's nerves were quieted, and as she herself calmed down, thought it all out. For the present, loverlike relations in public were impossible, and it was lucky that in a couple of days more she would be interned at Riseholme. Then with a flash of genius there occurred to her the interesting attitude to adopt in the interval. She would give the impression that there had been a lovers' quarrel. The more she thought of that, the more it commended itself to her. People would notice it, and wonder what it was all about, and their curiosity would never be gratified, for Lucia felt sure, from the horror depicted on Stephen's face, that he as

well as she would be for ever dumb on the subject of that midnight encounter. She must not look unhappy : she must on the other hand be more vivid and eager than ever, and just completely ignore Stephen. But there would be no lift for him in her car back to London : he would have to go by train.

The ex-lovers both came down very late next day, for fear of meeting each other alone, and thus they sat in adjoining rooms half the morning. Stephen had some Hermione-work on hand, for this party would run to several paragraphs, but, however many it ran to, Hermione was utterly determined not to mention Lucia in any of them. Hermione knew, however, that Mr. Stephen Merriall was there, and said so. . . . By one of those malignant strokes which are rained on those whom Nemesis desires to chastise, they came out of their rooms at precisely the same moment, and had to walk downstairs together, coldly congratulating each other on the beauty of the morning. Luckily there were people on the terrace, among whom was Marcia. She thought this was an excellent opportunity for beginning her flirtation with Stephen, and instantly carried him off to the kitchen garden, for unless she ate gooseberries on Sunday morning she died. Lucia seemed sublimely unaware of their departure, and joined a select little group round the Prime Minister. Between a discussion on the housing problem with him, a stroll with Lord Tony, who begged her to drop the 'lord,' and a little more Stravinski alone with Greatorex, the short morning passed very agreeably. But she saw when she went into lunch rather late that Marcia, and Stephen had not returned from their goose-berrying. There was a gap of just three places at the table, and it thus became a certainty that Stephen would sit next her.

Lunch was fully half over before they appeared, Marcia profusely apologetic.

"Wretchedly rude of me, dear Adele," she said, "but we had no idea it was so late, did we, Mr. Merriall? We went to the gooseberries, and—and I suppose we must have stopped there. Your fault, Mr. Merriall; you men have no idea of time."

"Who could, duchess, when he was with you?" said Stephen most adroitly.

"Sweet of you," said she. "Now do go on. You were in the middle of telling me something quite thrilling. And please, Adele, let nobody wait for us. I see you are all at the end of lunch, and I haven't begun, and gooseberries, as usual, have given me an enormous appetite. Yes, Mr. Merriall?"

Adele looked in vain, when throughout the afternoon Marcia continued in possession of Lucia's lover, for the smallest sign of resentment or uneasiness on her part. There was simply none; it was impossible to detect a thing that had no existence. Lucia seemed completely unconscious of any annexation, or indeed of Stephen's existence. There she sat, just now with Tony and herself, talking of Marcia's ball, and the last volume of risky memoirs, of which she had read a review in the Sunday paper, and Sophy's black room and Alf: never had she been more equipped at all points, more prosperously central. Marcia, thought Adele, was being wonderfully worsted, if she imagined she could produce any sign of emotion on Lucia's part. The lovers understood each other too well. . . . Or, she suddenly conjectured, had they quarrelled? It really looked rather like it. Though she and Tony were having a good Luciaphil meeting, she almost wanted Lucia to go away, in order to go into committee over this entrancing possibility. And how naturally she Tony'd him: she must have been practising on her maid.

Somewhere in the house a telephone bell rang, and a footman came out on to the terrace.

"Lucia, I know that's for you," said Adele. "Wherever you are, somebody wants you on the telephone. If you were in the middle of the Sahara, a telephone would ring for you from the sands of the desert. Yes? Who is it for?" she said to the footman.

"Mrs. Lucas, my lady," he said.

Lucia got up, quite delighted.

"You're always chaffing me, Adele," she said. "What a nuisance the telephone is. One never gets a rest from it. But I won't be a moment."

She tripped off.

"Tony, there's a great deal to talk about," said Adele quickly. "Now what's the situation between the lovers? Perfect understanding or a quarrel? And who has been ringing her up? What would you bet that it was——"

"Alf," said Tony.

"I wonder. Tony, about the lovers. There's something. I never saw such superb indifference. How I shall laugh at Marcia. She's producing no effect at all. Lucia doesn't take the slightest notice. I knew she would be great. Last night we had a wonderful talk in Marcia's room, till Aggie was an ass. There she is again. Now we shall know."

Lucia came quickly along the terrace.

Adele dear," she said. "Would it be dreadful of me if I left this afternoon? They've rung me up from Riseholme. Georgie rang me up. My Pepino is very far from well. Nothing really anxious, but he's in bed and he's alone. I think I had better go."

"Oh my dear," said Adele, "of course you shall do precisely as you wish. I'm dreadfully sorry: so shall we all be if you go. But if you feel you would be easier in your mind,——"

Lucia looked round on all the brilliant little groups. She was leaving the most wonderful party: it was the highest perch she had reached yet. On the other hand she was leaving her lover, which was a compensation. But she truly didn't think of any of these things.

"My poor old Pepino," she said. "I must go, Adele."