

Lucia Victorious
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Mrs. Lucia Pillson, the Mayor of Tilling, sought refuge in the garden room on this stifling July afternoon. There, in the coolest room of Mallards, she began fingering the first blessed movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. The slow, gentle tones issuing from the piano soothed her, as she was certain they assisted in attaining that elusive serenity all the personal instruction publications said was so conducive to meditation. She had been fascinated to read only yesterday about a particular Moslemic Mevlevi sect, who attained spiritual tranquility by dancing madly, but she felt sure that a little Whirling Dervish went a long way. For her part, she was certain great enlightenment was still possible on a less-strenuous scale. Thus, her communing with Art by complete absorption in her *un po' di musica*.

So as not to distract herself with the temporal world, she had specifically chosen the first movement of the Master's work because she knew it by heart. As the slow piece went on its ponderous way, she felt practised enough at being able to effortlessly attain that much sought-after "stillness of the mind", that she need not concentrate on her fingers as they moved across the ivory keys. Instead, she let the rhythms of the music help send her soul soaring while her conscious mind attended to more mundane matters.

For example, there was Diva Plaistow. Diva had opened a tea shop in the High Street several years ago. Although she ostensibly ran the shop to make money (and was relatively successful at it), it was also true that she ran it because she so enjoyed conversing with people. As a widow, she had otherwise found herself engaged principally in solitary pursuits, and this had proved to be a conversational boon.

In quest of her ideal — that is, to be surrounded by people to whom she could talk — Diva had asked the hanging committee of the Tilling Art Society if they wouldn't like to hold this season's exhibit at Ye Olde Tea House. Being president of the committee, it naturally fell upon Lucia to find a tactful way to dissuade her. Lucia knew she must compose a careful little speech to explain that the annual exhibit was designed to raise funds for the hospital. Now, naturally Lucia knew better — all her friends did — but it would be quite inappropriate if it looked like someone were to be profiting from the picture sales. Even an indirect benefit, such as increased traffic into and out of the tea shop, would be frowned upon. Diva would likely raise a bit of a fuss, but would hopefully relinquish the idea without undue hurt feelings.

Lucia sighed. This unsettling analysis was certainly not conducive to achieving a state of Nirvana, and she tried a different train of thought.

The other two members of the hanging committee were Algernon and Susan Wyse. He being related to the Italian aristocracy, she having been awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire. Neither accomplishment altered Lucia's high Lucia Victorious

opinion of them one atom, as they both bore these burdens with Christian courage. For his part, Mr. Wyse certainly could not be blamed for the strained state of affairs currently existing between His Majesty's Empire and the Italian government. Susan, likewise had no doubt considered refusal of so public an appreciation of her vague but generous work for the Tilling hospital, but upon reflection no doubt found she was unable to disappoint her fellow Tillingites: such an honour reflected upon the status of the town, no matter how ostentatious the recipient. Lucia had admitted to herself that, were she to suffer the same fate, she too would likely be forced into accepting such a difficult burden.

The Wyses were doubtless much relieved when Lucia took it upon herself to deal with Diva, and they would have thanked her for her efforts had they been in Tilling. As it was, they had embarked upon a week's trip to Capri to see Mr. Wyses' sister, the Contessa de Faraglione and would, in all likelihood, be profuse in congratulatory murmurings upon their return.

No matter what anybody said, it was merely coincidence that this trip allowed them to avoid any possible confrontation with Mrs. Plaistow. And since Lucia was the type to always speak the best of people, she charitably — and very publicly — laid the timing down to coincidence.

But there was one resident of Tilling who had long ago caused Lucia's kindness toward her to dry up at its source, so to speak. If one is unable to speak well of the living, discretion is the better part of vanity. The mere thought of this woman caused the normally exquisite ending of Lucia's piano piece to sound instead like a primary school recital of Falberg's "Storm at Sea".

She sighed to herself, shook out her poor fingers, and debated beginning all over again when the door to the garden opened and in walked her husband, idly clutching his petit point. He sank into the upholstered chair beside the piano.

"Lucia, I have told Grosvenor we will be expecting our lunch out here. This heat is beastly."

"Georgino mio, what a good idea."

"Oh!" Georgie suddenly sat up. "You'll never guess to whom I've let Mallard's Cottage for the months of August and September. At seven guineas a week. I'm just back from the house agent's."

Lucia smiled. She instantly deduced to whom Georgie must have sublet the Cottage, but decided to tease him. "That is more than the six you were asking only last summer. Very industrious, my dear."

"Now, you may be right, cam. I most likely will be unable to guess who you've rented to." She tapped her cheek with a delicate finger. "The Padre and Evie told us last night that they have rented out the Vicarage and will be living out of a bungalow near the golf links, so it can't be them." Lucia briefly considered the Tilling

tradition of homeowners renting out their own dwellings for the summer, and taking much smaller abodes at equally smaller rents, which allowed them to live for the rest of the year in houses much larger than they normally could afford. Of course, the Wyse could rarely see to take part in this much-expanded version of General Post as, once they had rented their cottage, they often chose Capri or Scotland for their holiday. And as Lucia's elegant Queen Anne house was quite the best house in Tilling, Lucia and Georgie stayed put (especially as the house suited them so well, and Lucia certainly had no need for additional income).

Georgie evidently decided Lucia's pause meant she was stumped, and he meant to enjoy himself. "No! Two more guesses!" he cried.

"No," Lucia repeated, "I suppose that dear Godiva Plaistow might have rented it for the summer months. The Cottage would be just the right size for her. But she wouldn't give up her tea shop."

"No, not Diva. Try again!" Georgie cried, his petit point falling disregarded from his lap.

Lucia placed her hands in her lap and looked him straight in the eye with one gimlet thrust. "You've leased the Cottage to Mrs. Elizabeth Mapp-Flint, of course. In fact," she said, turning and frowning at the piano keys, "I was just thinking about her."

"Lucia!" Georgie cried, his pleasure quite obviously spoilt. At least he could correct her. "Actually, her husband signed the lease."

Lucia laughed good naturedly at having led Georgie on, and was rather amused with his pedantic attention to accuracy. "My, my! You've had Major Benjy sign a contract? You are quite the businessman."

"Well," Georgie explained, picking up his embroidery from off the floor, "it was actually Elizabeth who suggested it. I suppose that she thought I might change my mind and give her the boot if she becomes a nuisance, as they'll be living right next door to us."

"If she becomes a nuisance?" Lucia suggested sweetly as she closed the piano lid.

Georgie smiled. "At least that marks the end of my five-year lease from Mr, and Mrs, Wyse. It was all right when I was a bachelor and living over there, but since we've been married, it's been nothing but a nuisance." He returned his attention to his needlepoint. "Who has Elizabeth got for her summer tenant? She seemed terribly coy about it when I asked."

"A widow. Some foreigner, apparently. Diva wasn't certain if she was Russian or Ukrainian, or whatnot. But I do hope the tenant's not another American." Lucia suddenly found herself unaccountably hopeful. Her discourse with Diva on the subject had occurred only yesterday, and Lucia at the time considered Diva's vagueness to be nothing more than lack of knowledge. Now Lucia wasn't quite so certain. In

fact, the more she considered it, the more likely it seemed Diva had been hiding something. And what could that something be, except that this new tenant must be American? The last time an American had come to Tilling, he had called himself a great film producer, and when he finally was sent packing, had nearly taken Lucia's reputation with him. No doubt Diva thought she was being kind in her own clumsy way by avoiding the subject.

But as this American was to be Elizabeth's guest, Lucia could only hope that she would be as much trouble for Elizabeth as Mr. Perkins had been for herself. She must remember when in public to strike the proper balance between elation at Elizabeth's having found a tenant for Grebe, and muted concern over having another foreigner in town. She was naturally quite capable of treading that fine line.

Mrs. Elizabeth Mapp-Flint awoke from her midday nap feeling rather vexed. She had had a perfectly horrible dream. Lucia had been arrested by a constable for being a public nuisance, and was being led away in handcuffs. But at the last moment, the constable realised he had made a mistake, and released her. Elizabeth frowned. The dream had been perfect up to that point. She yawned and glanced at the old ornate clock on the chimneypiece. She rose instantly, and rang for Withers.

Elizabeth's long-suffering parlourmaid entered, and Elizabeth fixed upon her an awful gaze. "Why is the mantle clock not wound?"

Withers looked from the clock to her mistress. "But I did wind it, madam. This morning, just as usual."

"What rubbish. If you had done so, it would certainly be ticking now. Unless, of course, it is broken again. In which case, you should have told me." With that, Elizabeth took hold of the heavy clock and pulled it toward her. Moving it off revealed a fallen whiskey tumbler recently vacated of its contents, with said contents having applied themselves along the mantle itself as well as into the back of the clock — the back cover of which had been left off after some previous repair and been found too troublesome to replace.

"My clock!" Elizabeth cried. "Poor Aunt Caroline's clock!" The broken clock slipped from her nerveless fingers and Withers nimbly caught it in mid-descent, whereupon it chimed twice, emitted an awful grinding sound and fell silent once again.

Elizabeth set her mouth. It would be inappropriate to display her anger with her husband in front of a servant, even one as long in her employ as Withers. "Where," she carefully enquired, "is the Major?"

"I couldn't say, madam. I recall him saying as 'e had some errands to attend to. But that was just after breakfast." Withers did her best to stand respectfully, but it was rather difficult to do so when attending to a clock weighing in the neighbourhood of half a stone. "No doubt to that little public house by the rail station in order to replenish his stock of whisky,"

Elizabeth seethed, forgetting herself.

"Madam," Withers pleaded, beginning to lose her grip.

"Yes, yes," Elizabeth said impatiently, her rage undoubtedly infusing her with enough strength to grasp the clock from Withers and move it over to an occasional table. They both stood for a moment.

"Shall I call the watchmaker, madam?"

"Yes, Withers. Mind you clean it up the spill before he arrives. And the chimneypiece."

Withers set about her task while Elizabeth returned to the couch to think things through. Her tenant for August and September would be arriving next month, and expected to see a house acceptably furnished, just as she herself expected Mallard's Cottage to be properly appointed for her own arrival. Certainly Aunt Caroline's timepiece would be restored by then to its rightful place, so she needn't trouble herself about that.

What did bother her was the deceitful way in which her Benjy-boy went about his habit. Not content to drink an enormous cup of tea at breakfast (provided by Elizabeth for his own good), another at tea, and a further one at dinner (though, of course, he was certainly entitled to coffee, instead), his thirst for liquid refreshment was clearly satiated only by a very different beverage. It was true that his drinking had gotten him into trouble before; she need not count the number of little pottery pigs from her collection which had been demolished due to an unsteady step and groping hand. Her collection's proximity to the dining room liquor cabinet was undoubtedly the cause of pieces of her beloved collection being found in a variety of places about the house in little shard heaps. She was quite willing to forgive his destruction of five of the little ceramic animals, if only he would show proper Christian remorse by giving up the elbow-lifting habit of which he was quite fond. It was quite an easy matter, she had determined. And the Major was undoubtedly up to the task. He might require a bit of encouragement from time to time, naturally, but perhaps it was time he made an earnest effort. Clearly she had been much too lenient these past years in pursuit of wedded bliss. True, neither she nor the Major had been innocents when they wed (and were certainly less so now), but she was convinced that it was not too late to teach an old dog new habits. And she was determined that her old dog would learn them.

How to manage it was the real issue on her agenda, for the Major was often out on an errand to post a letter, or more likely off to the golf links. And while she could not prove that he was not out hewing his golf ball to pieces, he usually came back in a cheery mood. His slurred speech, he would explain, was due to chapped lips on blustery days, or due to the chill on rainy ones.

She would have to see if this change of households

for the summer months would enable her to keep a tighter rein on his activities. Clearly something had to be done.

The following day, Diva's tearoom was bustling with activity when Lucia popped in for a post-council meeting refreshment. She was a bit out of breath, as she preferred to bicycle the short distance from the Town Hall over to the High Street and thus to Wasters. This coincided with her determination to exhibit highmindedness in public: since her election to the post of mayor almost three years ago now, her Royce usually occupied the garage. This, she had decided, helped prove how very much like the average person she really was. (The fact that Tilling's picturesque streets were rather narrow and difficult for the Royce to navigate had little to do with this situation.)

She truly enjoyed mingling with her friends, and pursuing errands on foot (or by bicycle). This meant she could easily catch up on gossip. Like Shakespeare's King Henry, she felt it was rather noble to mingle among her friends to determine what the common folk were thinking.

Lucia placed her bicycle against the kerb and sighed. As challenging as it was for her, Lucia felt she had to make a stand today and make clear to Diva the inappropriateness of her art exhibition suggestion. With her third (and final) tenure as Mayor of Tilling rapidly coming to a close, Lucia's position certainly had thrust upon her numerous opportunities to take charge and make her views heard above any objections. This was despite underhanded schemes by those less clever and resourceful than herself, most notable among those being her beloved Mayoress, Elizabeth Mapp-Flint (also coming to the end of her third term). The position of Mayoress was an institution designed to lessen the municipal burden for the Mayor, a supposition Elizabeth Mapp-Flint courageously ignored in favour of looking out for the best interests of Tilling in general. It really was rather unfortunate that these best interests so often conflicted with the desires of the Mayor herself. Fortunately, Lucia was usually quicker and more resourceful than her subordinate, and more often than not managed to deflect or outwit Mrs. Mapp-Flint's plans.

With these three years of political manoeuvring under her belt, Lucia felt her ability to handle Diva seemed assured. It would be silly for Diva to put on such airs. They were, after all, such good friends. And since strawberries would soon be in season, and thus luscious (and inexpensive) teas would soon be bountiful, it would be churlish of Diva to make a fuss. True, Diva couldn't often make time to attend such parties herself, but there was still the principle of the thing to consider. While Diva was not one to be given to enthusiasms, it was best to nip this trouble in the bud and avoid any extended hostilities. Lucia placed her bright white and green parasol in

the new umbrella stand by the door, removed her gloves, and took a seat near the big bay window which overlooked the street. She spotted Diva moving about the room and was relieved when she came over herself to take Lucia's order, instead of instructing her Janet to do so.

"Diva, dear! I had to pop in after my council meeting. I'm absolutely famished. Such a short session today. No disagreements of any kind. Pity poor Elizabeth couldn't attend. So nice when everyone is of one mind, don't you agree?"

Diva waited for Lucia's speech to end. "Hullo, Lucia. Glad to see you. Couldn't agree with you more. China or Indian tea?"

"A Indiano please Diva. Green, if you have it. And thanks so much for asking." Lucia assumed a casual, though studied, air but had to abandon it almost immediately as she saw Diva was screwing herself up, no doubt to ask about the art exhibit. But Lucia was determined to get critical information out of Diva before any unpleasantness might stop up the information at its source. "By the way, have you heard any more from Elizabeth about her new invitato?"

"Her new what?" asked Diva.

"Italian, my dear. Her new guest: her tenant for Grebe. Heard any more about her?"

"Oh." Lucia could see Diva wrestling with herself. Evidently her better nature won out and she spoke up.

"Not really very much," she began, guardedly. "What have you heard?"

"Just what you've told me. A Spanish woman. Or was it Greek?"

"No," Diva corrected her. "Elizabeth was very specific. American. Arriving next month. Fourteen guineas a week," she added in her telegraphic manner.

Lucia's eyes held a radiant glint for an instant, but she managed to switch it off before Diva noticed.

"What a new experience this will be. I so look forward to meeting people from other cultures and places, don't you? I think it will be refreshing to have a new overseas guest visit Tilling for the summer."

Diva stood there with her mouth agape. Only last month Lucia was denouncing foreigners who trampled on flower beds and disparaged the conventions of tea time. On the other hand, if this American turned out to be as much a fiasco as the previous one had been, Diva was sharp enough to realise that it would reflect badly upon Elizabeth, and not Lucia. So Lucia could afford to be magnanimous, at least in theory. Diva decided to hold her tongue, as she was still scheming for approval to hold the art exhibit on the premises. "Quite," agreed Diva firmly. "I'll be just a moment." Lucia watched Diva disappear down into the kitchen and turned her attention to the window. Down the road, directly in the centre of it, in fact, sat Irene Coles: daring avant garde painter and

fervent admirer of Lucia's many gifts. Irene's penchant for wearing knickerbockers and other items of men's apparel dovetailed nicely with her manner, which was more akin to a man's than a woman's. Right now she was engaged in a fairly boisterous discussion with the chauffeur of a large black car. Apparently the driver considered the road to be reserved for vehicular traffic, while Irene clearly considered any particular location in Tilling to be a spot suitable for her sketching, constrained only by the position of the sun. Lucia sat in rapt attention.

A constable arrived in due course, and it looked as if Irene was choosing to ignore him. That worked for a brief period of time, until he began moving her painting things to the kerb, whereupon she grabbed her easel from him and — heedless of the paint freshly applied thereupon — tucked it under one arm, placed her paint box under the other, spat neatly in the gutter, and stormed off. Lucia shook her head compassionately as Diva reappeared and served the tea. "Her name is Mrs. Blanchard," Diva said, continuing the conversation exactly where she had left off. "She's from New England."

"Oh. Do you think somewhere like Massachusetts, or perhaps Washington?"

"Isn't Washington on the other end of that country?" offered Diva. "Or," she quickly added, eager to propitiate the president of the hanging committee, "do you mean Washington, D.C.?"

"The Western end?" asked Lucia with a faint air of disbelief. "I think not. In fact, I'm almost certain of it. But that is immaterial," she continued, privately considering the possibility that she had made an error. "The point is she is from America. I don't doubt that she is a very proper sort of woman. Don't you agree?"

"Emphatically. You can count on me, Lucia. Now you'll have to excuse me a moment," she said as she moved off toward the door as it admitted more customers.

"Of course. So glad we could have this little chat." Lucia smiled and sipped her tea while awaiting Diva's return. She had now gotten the information she had desired regarding Elizabeth's new tenant, and resigned herself to dealing a fatal blow to Diva's budding artistic entrepreneurship.

A charitably-minded individual who saw a gentleman, say, in his late fifties, sauntering slowly down the slope of Channel Hill might perhaps attribute his erratic movement to the lack of prescription spectacles; or to the harrowing steepness of the street; or to the cobblestones (which made navigating that particular street such an exciting sport). However, this reasoning could, on no account, be expected to explain the song he was singing as he walked. Snatches of a tune courteously described as a barracks-room ballad rebounded off the fronts of the modest Elizabethan homes which lined the avenue.

Major Benjamin Mapp-Flint, late of His Majesty's India forces was not a literary man. Nevertheless, he might well have agreed with the sentiment of Omar Khayyam's ruminations, "While you live, drink! — for, once dead, you never shall return!" Doubtless, though, he was much too concerned with careful pedestrian navigation to bother with any such literary allusion, as it was not the rough cobbles of the road surface which was the cause of his unduly fastidious attention, but the Major's inability to place one foot in front of the other.

Such was still the case when he approached Irene on her footstool sketching by the Landgate, which led out of town toward Grebe and home. The fact that he did not perceive who it was illustrated a healthy indication of his intoxication, as Irene's manner and mode of dress were nigh unto unmistakable. He tipped his hat as he sauntered by, muttering a greeting.

"What ho, Major!" cried Irene. "They've kicked me out of Tilling proper, so I must do my sketching out here. But the light won't last much longer. What do you think? Quite striking, isn't it? Boudicca, nude on her chariot. Her hair flying about as she leads her troops forward to vanquish the Romans. Whoa! Steady on, there Major, or you'll be over and in that hedgerow in a thrice."

"Eh? oh, right."

"Left, silly," Irene joked, as she jumped up to steer him clear of the obstinate foliage. "So," she asked, brushing some drying mud off his jacket sleeve, "A bit early for dinner, old man, but it looks like you might already have had yours. Two bottles? Or was it three?"

"What's that? 'Course not. Liz' wouldn't ever permit that sort of thing. Fine woman and all that." The Major looked about as if he meant to confide in Irene, yet the decibel level at which he was speaking seemed to belie that assessment. "Fine figure of a woman, my Elizabeth. Wouldn't you say, Miss Coles?"

Irene laughed goodnaturedly. "I say I'd better call you a taxi if you're supposed to get home in one piece."

The Major looked down at his feet, as if they were responsible for his navigational difficulties. "I'll just wait here, I think." He shambled over to the side of the road and sat down heavily.

By the time the taxi had arrived, the Major was snoring loudly, and it took both Irene and the driver to get him into the back seat.

Elizabeth, unaware of the condition of her husband (late of His Majesty's India forces), stopped in to see Diva, only to find her fuming.

"Imagine!" cried Diva, "'An inappropriate venue for charity.' My house!"

"Diva, dear, whatever are you talking about?"

"The art exhibit. The hanging committee has seen fit to refuse my offer of hanging their old pictures in my

parlours. No one bothers going over to the Institute anymore just to look at Lucia's daubs, or Mr. Wyses' still life. I offered them a fine venue. Plenty of traffic. It's outrageous. The hanging committee be hanged!" "Well, my dear, I am entirely on your side," Elizabeth said, which was a lie. "I thought yours was a marvellous idea. But aren't you overstating your case a bit? I admit that when I was president of the hanging committee there was certainly enough interest in the exhibit." She looked about her. "On the other hand..."

"Yes?" asked Diva sharply.

"Well, it is really not for me to say, dear one, but if you asked my opinion..."

Diva steeled herself. "Go on. Hurry up: I have biscuits in the oven. What do you have to say?"

"Only that I am beginning to see that your little rooms are perhaps a bit small. One wonders if there would be enough wall space to properly display all the sketches. And the lighting sometimes isn't the most flattering, you know. Your card room in the back tends to be rather dark. There are times I can hardly tell if I am holding a hand full of rubbish or a cornucopia of Aces."

"Really, Elizabeth. Some friend you are. My walls are quite good enough. I've measured them out, and there is more than enough space. And as for lighting, I can only say it's a good thing you didn't ask the committee to hold an exhibit at Grebe — such a dark, dreadful place. And so far out of town: half a mile if it's a foot."

Elizabeth screwed up her face and turned away as if Diva's words had an unpleasant odour about them.

"Diva, dear. We are such good friends —"

"And that's another thing," Diva said, continuing her ranting, "How could you accept an American as a tenant? You know what happened the last time."

"Diva! Surely we are open-minded enough not to categorise all foreigners into a single stereotype? Perish the thought! I wouldn't have thought you capable of it. Mrs. Blanchard is such a charming woman. So cultured, so genteel. Quite a different matter from that odious Mr. Perkins."

Diva gave Elizabeth a triumphant look. "So you are concerned about your new tenant's conduct, after all. Good to hear it. Excuse me," she said, and trundled off to the kitchen.

Elizabeth, deciding to act surprised by this harsh treatment by her best friend, stormed out of the room, and narrowly avoided colliding with the Padre and his wife.

"Oh, Elizabeth," squeaked little Evie. "I heard you have a Polish princess taking Grebe for the summer. Is it true?"

Elizabeth had to compose herself for a moment before managing a brittle laugh. "Why, dear Evie! Where on earth did you get such an idea? She is an American. Arriving at the start of August."

"Ach! 'Wud per'aps not be to fine a thing after all

eh? Last American to stop 'ere caused a but of a ruckus. Wouldn't yea say, mistress Mapp-Flint?" Elizabeth smiled at Reverend Kenneth Bartlett's curious mix of regional dialects, as one might smile to a small boy who thinks he is being cute, and unsuccessfully attempted to recall just when he had begun adopting different regional accents to graft upon his native Birmingham speech.

"Yes Padre, that is true. But the proof is in the pudding: not everyone from America is necessarily so..."

"Quite!" Evie squeaked.

"Quite," echoed the Padre. He rubbed his hands in anticipation. "'An now wud ye care to indulge us in a rubber o' bridge, mistress Mapp-Flint? An' tea on top of it? I ha' a few hours yet before I need ta be back for a baptism. If she's not too busy, per'aps Mistress Plaistow can make a fourth."

The invitation to bridge was undeniably tempting, but Elizabeth felt she would be unable to return to face Diva so soon unless she brought along with her an apology. She would much rather avoid any self-effacing display of insincere remorse by staying clear of Diva for a day or so, and then pretending the disagreement had never occurred.

"I am afraid I shall have to take a rain check, Padre. I've just had a delightful tea myself, and now I need to get home to see that my Benjy-boy will have a proper dinner."

The Bartletts said their "au reservoirs" and disappeared into the teahouse, and Elizabeth began the long walk home.

She approached the Landgate, which stood astride the sole road leading out from Tilling to Grebe, when a masculine voice called out to her. She spied Irene painting by the late afternoon's light.

"Hey, Mapp!"

Elizabeth debated ignoring her, then considered how far she could get if she broke into a run, and ultimately decided to face her.

If Lucia was Elizabeth's nemesis (and there was ample evidence to support that suggestion) then Irene Coles was Lucia's Herald. As a dreadful mimic, she often turned the full eloquence of that gift upon Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who could face down Mr. Hopkins whenever he submitted outrageous bills for fish which she could not possibly have ordered, was helpless whenever she was the focus of Irene's attention. She walked over to where the Quaint One was sketching.

"Hello, Irene mine. Another pretty little picky, I see," she said without glancing at the canvas.

"So is it true?" Irene asked as she banged out her clay pipe on the sole of her shoe. "Did you actually get King Croesus of Lydia to let your old house?"

"Don't be silly, Irene dear."

"Yes, but did you?" Irene asked, with her usual directness.

"No, I did not. I do, however, have an understanding

with a very nice woman from America. Mrs. Blanchard. She arrives next month. From New England," she added.

"Oh, well. I was hoping it might have been someone interesting," said Irene, and returned to her sketch. "So is Lucia allowing Diva to put the Art Exhibition in her house?"

"I'm afraid that poor Worship does not see the benefit to publicising our town's little efforts. She felt Wasters was an 'inappropriate venue', and while I can hardly blame her —"

"Hah!" laughed the Quaint One. "Maybe you think Grebe would be a better place! No, Mapp. Better to keep my works of art somewhere people will actually visit."

"Yes, dear. Oh, look at the time!" Elizabeth exclaimed, glancing at her watch in the dark. "I'm afraid I must run home, or my Benjy-boy won't get any dinner."

"I wouldn't worry about him," Irene said, her voice heavy with meaning, "I'm fairly sure he's not hungry. He's on a diet of liquid meals, you know."

Elizabeth gave a practised gasped and, turning abruptly, strode off in the direction of Grebe. She realised that she should truly have been offended by Irene's comments. Naturally, if the need arose in the next day or two, she could certainly use Irene's comments against her: her own sudden withdrawal set the stage for that. Instead, her thoughts were occupied by Irene's suggestion that Grebe was unsuitable for displaying this season's exhibit. She might well be correct, but Elizabeth was not planning on occupying Grebe this season. She would be at the Cottage. Right in the centre of town.

Georgie was, as usual, looking for his knitting needles when he wandered into the garden room. Lucia was sitting at the big table by the window, engrossed in a map. He assumed she was elbow deep in another plan to build a road, or to aid the unemployed, or to expand the street lighting. He said nothing, as he had no desire to get involved in any Mayoral matters this time of night — he couldn't possibly hope to be conscientious at this hour. He quickly spotted his needles in the wicker basket by the upholstered chair and nabbed them. He realised he had discarded them there late this afternoon while he dozed, as that chair was advantageously positioned as regarding the draft from the open window which faced the garden. He was engaged in a stealthy withdrawal from the room when Lucia exclaimed, "Eureka!" causing him to jump and drop his new-found instruments.

"What is it, Lucia?" he cried, picking up his needles, presuming she was not merely quoting Archimedes.

"Look!" she said, pointing to her map. He sighed, and dutifully walked over to her. He was amazed to see the outline of America.

"What? Lucia, are you planning a trip abroad this year? Whatever for?" Georgie's tone suddenly turned sympathetic. "Oh, dear. Are the trials and tribulations of your position tiring you out? I suppose it could happen to anybody. If I was forced to deal with Elizabeth as my Mayoress, I should have been dead long ago. A trip might be just the thing."

Lucia turned a withering gaze upon him and he fell silent. "Gino, do not be so silly. Diva and I were discussing the location of... certain states. I was looking for Washington."

Georgie sat down across from her and donned his spectacles. He attempted to find Washington on the map, but his unfamiliarity with the continent (and, to be fair, the map was upside-down) prevented his success.

"Isn't that on the West coast? Or do you mean Washington D.C.?" he asked. Georgie turned his head like an owl in his attempts to decipher the unaccustomed sigils. Lucia, in exasperation,

grabbed the paper and spun it to face him.

"Thank you, Lucia," he said absently as his eyes scanned the unfamiliar page. "Well, I was right. Northwest corner. A private school education is good for something after all."

Lucia pushed aside the map and smiled grimly. "A duet, then, before bedtime? I just received a new Mozart piece."

Georgie suddenly realised that Lucia must have thought Washington was located elsewhere, and had had words to that effect with Diva. If only Lucia could admit her mistakes. But then, she would not be Lucia. He fingered his knitting needles and shrugged. "If you like, certainly."

He stepped over to the piano where the pages were already laid out, proving that Lucia had already "had a go at it while Georgie had been otherwise occupied. He shrugged: typical Lucia.

Lucia sat. "Shall I take the treble? Very well, then. Ready? Uno, due tre!"