

Chapter 2

Georgie was intent on sketching the giant sunflowers which Lucia had planted for the first time that spring. They were growing up along — and easily reached up above — the east wall of the kitchen garden. True, they were ostensibly for medicinal purposes, but Georgie thought they would be an exquisite challenge for a flower study, judging from their enormous size and unusual textures. For the backdrop, he had managed the lines of mellow brick of the wall with the aid of judicious rules to act as guides (applied lightly in pencil), he had traced in the edge of the wooden paling off to the right, and had caught the sturdy stems and broad leaves of the flowers with just the right colour of green.

From his vantage point, he could see the roof of Mallard's Cottage on the other side of the wall, along with Ye Olde House house beyond that. And although Ye Olde House had a marvelously crooked chimney which was a delight to paint, Georgie felt such detail would detract from the sunflowers — and it was so difficult to get just right.

He paused to wipe from his brush the yellowish-red mixture which he had tried out for the flower petals, but which didn't quite work. He glanced over at the corner of the garden in which his croquet hoops lay idle, and sighed. It had been quite a long time now since he had free time to devote to his favourite outdoor sport. He really must get back to them, and wondered what it was which had been occupying all his time of late. He couldn't fathom it. There were his trips to the Hastings barber who rejuvenated the rich auburn of his hair and Van Dyke beard, but they were but once a fortnight at best. There were the innumerable duets he played with Lucia, which required him to steal a look at the arrangement once or twice beforehand so that he could be as familiar with it as she when they sat to play it over together for the very first time. The tea parties at which, still qualifying as Tilling's *jeune premier* despite his advancing years, he was often in demand. And of course the morning marketing and attendant gossip — which so often required further verification from the source, that the marketing hour on more than one occasion had lasted the entire morning. No, there was a major force in his life, which kept him extraordinarily busy. He looked up to see Lucia stride across the lawn toward him, and he instantly recalled whose schemes it were which kept him so occupied. She reached him and took a step back, surveying his sketch.

"Marvellous, Georgie. You've got the colour of the brick just right, don't you think?"

"Thank you," Georgie replied.

"And the stems. The petals of your fore are a bit reddish, though, wouldn't you say? No matter, I am sure you will fix that."

"Yes, I shall," Georgie replied guardedly, wondering what Lucia really wanted. Although her praise for his

artistic accomplishments typically was quite sincere, she did not often apply them with such lavish brushstrokes. She got to the point.

"Georgie, I have decided to reinitiate our little literary circle."

"Is that wise? Isn't that a bit like throwing Elizabeth's last disaster in her face?" Georgie turned back to his sketch to find the reddish-yellow petals beginning to drip down dangerously near his brick wall. He grabbed his brush cloth and dabbed at it.

Lucia appeared unperturbed. "Certainly I shall invite Elizabeth. I have a forgiving spirit. She is a decent sort of woman — no doubt parts of her are — and why not? I refuse to stoop to her level of pettiness by excluding her. To do so would demean the entire purpose of the literary circle — that being to elevate my friends, by the written word, to a higher sphere. To aspire to the likes of Shakespeare and Plato." Lucia added in an offhand manner, "Of course, if she feels incapable of contributing to the scholarly discussions which I plan to initiate, then she, of course, must not dream of attending."

Georgie did not bother replying. The first (and last) time the literary circle had met was almost six months ago. He couldn't speak for Elizabeth, but he was certain that the rest of Tilling had a memory at least as long as his. And unless Lucia was considering making a bit more out of the event than merely having amateur author readings and offering a tomato salad supper, he doubted she would get much of a turnout. The original event had been exciting, but only so far as it had been a stage for the heated rivalries between Lucia and Elizabeth. A sequel could hardly be as exciting.

Georgie looked pensive. "You'll be holding the readings here at Mallards, I suppose?"

"Naturally. Of course, if the day is fine, I shall hold it out here in the garden. If wet, we shall all enjoy the comfort of the garden room." She turned to survey the extensive grounds, the most expansive in Tilling.

"But I see what you mean. Perhaps what we need is some sort of outdoor focus: a temple to the poets. I shall consider that. What a good idea, Georgie."

When Lucia began attributing her own inspirations to himself, Georgie usually interpreted that as a signal to tune her out lest she get carried away with herself. He did his best to appear absorbed in his picture.

"What is it, Georgie?"

He put down his brush and turned to face her. "It's just that the last one ended so badly for Elizabeth, I don't see how you expect anyone to get involved in it again. It would just be plain meanness, and everyone knows it."

Lucia gave Georgie one of those looks behind which he had long ago learned lurked so much purpose. "Then I shall have to be sure that the opening event is

remarkable in some way."

"Yes, that would be a good idea," Georgie agreed cautiously. He stroked his beard absentmindedly.

"Georgie!"

"What?"

"You're getting yellow paint in your goatee!"

"Oh! How tarsome!" he cried, reaching for his painting cloth.

As he cleaned off his fingers and dabbed at his discoloured hair, the church bells chimed the top of the hour. Georgie saw Lucia look at her watch and assume a brisk attitude.

"I was just about to go down to the rail station for a new timetable. Do you wish me to pick you up anything while I am out, caro?"

"No thank you. I did my shopping this morning, just as usual."

"Try some water, Georgie," Lucia said as she turned to go. "Au reservoir."

He continued dabbing carefully at his beard, worried that the paint might somehow wash out or discolour his hair dye, when he suddenly paused. Lucia's final announcement struck him as unusual. Unless he was in error (and if anyone knew Lucia it was he) her trip to the station was for an alternate purpose. No one went all the way out to the rail station for a new timetable when the Stationer's in the High Street stocked a supply. Standing and managing to just make out the clock on the church tower, he realised that Lucia would be in just enough time to meet the 3:20 train from Southampton. It was true that the last time someone of any importance arrived by that rail, it had been Queen Elizabeth. And before that, the Prince of Wales (although he could be discounted, as his train had been going in the opposite direction).

Well, whatever Lucia was doing was no real concern of his: he would hear about it in due course. The pursuit of his painting was far more important. He concentrated on rinsing off his brushes for a good minute or two, but could finally stand it no longer. He put down his sketching things and thought it all through.

Mrs. Mapp-Flint's new tenant was to arrive today, from America. Since most steamships disembarked their passengers at Southampton, the 3:20 was the first train which could conceivably transport the worthy woman to Tilling. If she had landed early this morning, that was plenty of time for her to travel the not inconsiderable distance between there and here. And if that were not enough (admittedly circumstantial) evidence, Elizabeth had heralded only yesterday in the High Street how she expected her new tenant by the 3:20. It would be remarkable if Lucia had not heard about it.

This, then, appeared to be yet another ploy on the part of his wife. Lucia had a habit of annexing anyone who showed the slightest bit of promise.

Time and again, she simply outflanked Elizabeth.

It had occasionally proved an expensive battle, but he knew Lucia was quite serious in her personal war to maintain peace over her little Protectorate. And he knew she always did her best to shield her town against all enemies — from without and from within. When it came to Elizabeth, Georgie felt he knew Lucia's attitude had often been Biblical. Specifically, Matthew's admonition to pluck out a limb which offends thee could be construed to suggest that Lucia should cast out Elizabeth if and when she became too burdensome. And although Georgie felt that Lucia had become dangerously close to doing just that on several occasions, their "final battle" had yet to take place. And perhaps never would.

With that disappointing thought in mind, Georgie collected his things and, with a last wistful glance at his disregarded croquet hoops, hurried indoors. Events were once again heating up. And he naturally backed Lucia.

Elizabeth was poking about her own house, packing away items which she deemed too valuable to leave to a tenant's whim. Although she did not consider for one moment the possibility that her new tenant was a thief, it was best not to put her (really rather steadfast) faith in humanity to the test using as bait her best plate and linen. Three packed barrels of those precious items stood in the dining room, awaiting her gardener, who would transport them to Mallard's Cottage.

Sitting beside those containers were two more barrels, filled with bibelots from her and the Major's bedroom, personal mementos from the bath, and her Tilling china pig collection from the dining room. All that remained, then, were the books in her drawing room. She rummaged through the glass-fronted cabinet and removed the copy of Poetic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson which had once belonged to her late great-aunt Caroline. She opened the green cloth-bound work and assured herself that the signature on the flyleaf distinguished it as a cherished heirloom (although a suspicious-minded person might have construed it to be merely a bookseller's mark). She placed it carefully in one of the open barrels. She then reached for the three copies of her own book *Dreams Unspoken, Thoughts Fulfilled* which had been sent to her gratis by the publisher only this spring. Pity that so few readers of her work had recognised genius when they saw it.

She looked over in the direction of the breakfast table, where the morning post had included an invitation from Lucia for Elizabeth to join the newly-revived Tilling Literary Society. She recalled how she, herself, had begun that august body. True, everyone else saw it as merely an attempt on her part to grandstand. And while she would have been the first to admit that she had planned a reading from her work in progress (the aforementioned languidly-selling book), it

was also true that she would have welcomed anyone else's wish to recite from his (or especially her) own writings. Since, of course, no one else had done any writings, she had avoided the inconvenience which would have been involved in any show of consideration for others.

That her own book took centre stage was, in retrospect, really rather unfortunate. When she recited the passage where she had overheard Lucia proclaim her undying passion for a younger man who was not even her husband, she had hoped to benefit from the fallout. How was she to have known that Lucia was only practising lines from a cinema picture?

She set her mouth grimly. This time around she would naturally participate, despite Lucia's letter in which she had obliquely suggested it might be too difficult for her, considering everything which had happened the last time. Elizabeth was not about to allow any new, potentially useful fad to be orchestrated solely by that woman. She had briefly considered choosing a different passage from her book for recital, but the invitation had specifically said the Society was to be a showcase for new works. If she was to beat Lucia, she would have to do so within the framework of the rules Lucia had laid down. Elizabeth returned to the bookcase.

The next volume on the shelf was bound in American cloth and the spine lacked a title stamp. Likely a book from a private printing. Elizabeth flipped it open and scanned the first few pages. Perhaps this would do to copy out of, and offer as her own prose. Although Elizabeth naturally hated prevarication on principle, there were times when expediency demanded it. She would have no time between now and when the circle met next week to author anything of her own. She felt certain that indoctrinating her new tenant would keep her occupied.

The book's copyright and contents pages were missing: they had evidently been pulled out or fell out long ago. The latter seemed more likely, as the whole volume was rather dilapidated. That was good news. The ancient condition of the book suggested that it was unlikely that anyone else had seen it, or if they had, that they would remember it. Nevertheless, she must not leave any page unturned (so to speak), and would have to remember to examine the volumes at the lending library to be certain her little charade would come off without a hitch.

Elizabeth looked up in surprise as the newly-repaired mantelpiece clock chimed the half-hour. She had been sitting at the dining room table for the last hour, transcribing what was to become her new presentation onto clean sheets of foolscap, and the time had simply flown. She called to Withers to begin preparing tea for two, grabbed her hat and gloves, and began the walk to the train station to meet Mrs.

Blanchard.

She silently congratulated herself at her skill as she passed under the arch of the Landgate. By proclaiming to all and sundry that her tenant was to arrive on the 3:20, there would be no one else at the station this late in the day. Elizabeth could easily explain away this subtle bit of misdirection. She would say Mrs. Blanchard had telephoned her — a trunk call — just before three o'clock to let her know that she had missed the previous train, and would arrive by the 5:40.

She could just imagine what a fine woman like Mrs. Blanchard would have thought if she had been met by poor Diva who, covered in flour and with her bright red face, would undoubtedly have attempted to coax the poor woman in the teashop for a sardine tartlet. Or what about the Padre and dear little Evie. He who spoke in a patchwork of dialects coating his native Birmingham, and she hardly at all. Or, most of all, if Lucia herself had managed to grab hold of her, speaking the most exquisite rubbish about Shakespeare, and Dante" readings, and — worst of all — pretending to be a fluent Italian linguist. Elizabeth clenched her jaw as she considered this most hated of all mysteries. It was impossible to prove that Lucia knew Italian, yet it was just as impossible to prove she did not. Most infuriating. Someday...

The 5:40 was a reliable train, and Elizabeth hurried along the road. It would never do to leave the woman kicking up her heels at the station, when she had been promised someone would meet her there.

She had misjudged the time it would take, and arrived on the platform just as the church tower struck out three-quarters of an hour. The train had gone, but a woman looking to be in her late thirties was sitting on a bench, alongside five pieces of luggage and a single hat box. The woman was attired in a finely-cut dress the colour of coquelicot, and wore a complementary hat adorned with a poppy pattern. Could this be Mrs. Blanchard? It would seem impossible for her to be anyone else (despite her youth) yet the comparative dearth of suitcases would almost make it appear that she would be staying a fortnight at most — and certainly not two months. But as there was no one else on the platform, who else could she be?

Elizabeth approached her, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

The woman stood and extended her hand.

"Mrs. Mapp-Flint? I am —"

"Of course, my dear! There is no need for introductions," Elizabeth said, smiling even wider and grasping the proffered hand in both of hers. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you at last! I have heard so much about you."

"You have?" the woman asked, looking pleased.

"Certainly. Your letters and so on. You've arrived just in time for tea."

The woman glanced at her watch. "How nice!"

"Yes. We must call a taxi for your luggage. Grebe is about a half mile out of town. I would have brought my own car, but I'm afraid we don't own one. Such an unnecessary expense, don't you think?"

"I certainly agree. I don't own one, either."

As the taxi took them through Tilling and out under the Landgate, Elizabeth wasn't quite certain what to make of Mrs. Blanchard. The lack of a motor car was certainly not at issue: if poverty were a crime, she herself would have been incarcerated years ago when she speculated on the stock market and had to sacrifice her aunt Caroline's Mallards on the greedy altar labelled "Lucia" in order to survive.

The taxi rounded a bend, and presented to Mrs. Blanchard her first look at Grebe. Behind a substantial hedge of hornbeam sat an attractive two story whitewashed structure of evidentially ample dimensions.

"Mrs. Mapp-Flint, allow —"

"Oh, please call me Elizabeth. Do!"

"Your home is gorgeous. Just lovely."

Elizabeth was flattered that Grebe had made such a fair impression. Mrs. Blanchard's obvious delight in the house meant Elizabeth would be firm in directing that garden produce, which was quite bountiful this year, was not included in the price which had been agreed upon via transcontinental post.

Judging from the steam curling out of the teapot, the service had obviously not been sitting for any length of time, but Elizabeth rang for a fresh pot anyway.

Her guest demurred. "Nothing for me, thanks. I ate when my train stopped at Brighton."

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. She was half-starved from all that walking, and now to discover that her guest was not hungry only made matters worse. She certainly would be unable to eat in front of Mrs. Blanchard, but least she could have some tea. She once again firmly applied her smile and added cream to her cup. "Such a nice train. Since you stopped in Brighton, I suppose your ship came in at Southampton, and not London?"

"Yes. We changed trains at Hastings. By the way, Elizabeth," the young woman said, "I should ask you: where is Mrs. Blanchard? Our boat was early, so she arrived in Tilling on the 3:20."

Elizabeth froze, the teacup halfway to her mouth.

Mrs. Blanchard smiled. "My secretary should have arrived by now, and no doubt has explained to Mrs. Mapp-Flint that I have come on ahead."

Mrs. Blanchard was sitting with Lucia and Georgie in the garden room of Mallards. She was a large, well-kept woman with a kindly face, looking to be somewhere in the vicinity of fifty, and Lucia (having celebrated her own golden jubilee just recently herself) found her so far to be an acceptable sort. Certainly

Georgie seemed taken by her.

"Mrs. Pillson, do you think I might impose upon you for the use of the telephone? I want to call Mrs. Mapp-Flint and explain to her where I have gotten to."

"Why certainly. Georgie, please show Mrs. Blanchard the telephone room, so she may have some privacy."

Georgie led Lucia's guest out of the garden room and into the main house. Lucia picked up a sugar cube off the tea tray and crunched it meditatively. This Mrs. Blanchard seemed rather decent, although she perhaps talked a bit too much about herself. And Lucia wasn't sure what a woman of means would be needing with a full time social secretary: she surely could not have quite so many engagements as that, could she?

Lucia turned to the window and gave a little start, then smiled in anticipation. There was Elizabeth, marching swiftly up the road from the direction of the High Street, making a beeline toward Mallards. Mrs. Blanchard had certainly not gotten to the telephone room yet, and if she did, it would have been physically impossible for Elizabeth to have traversed the half-mile or so from Grebe in such a short time. And if she had somehow managed this miraculous feat, she would not have travelled in quite so circuitous a route: there was no need to go anywhere near the High Street if one was travelling from Mallards to Grebe. The alternate explanation was that Elizabeth had fetched Mrs. Blanchard's secretary, and had deduced (by due process of elimination) where to find Mrs. Blanchard herself. And, no doubt, before facing her rival, Elizabeth had taken the precaution of returning to the rail station to insure that the woman had not somehow been overlooked.

The garden room of Mallards was detached from the main house and sat at a right angle to it. Its bay window offered a perfect view of her own front door and Lucia watched Elizabeth ring the bell and be admitted by Grosvenor. A few moments later, Grosvenor appeared at the entrance to the garden room, rather flushed. It would seem Mrs. Mapp-Flint had driven the poor parlour maid in front of her like a pearl before swine.

"Mrs. Mapp-Flint would like a word with your Worship," Grosvenor announced, "if it is convenient."

"Of course. Send her right in," Lucia cried, all cordiality.

Lucia rose as Elizabeth entered, and they stage kissed. "Elizabeth-mia! Buon pomeriggio! To what do I owe this delicious surprise? Won't you stay and have some tea? I'll get Grosvenor to bring us a fresh pot."

"Nothing for me, thank you," Elizabeth replied, her hunger pangs being not in the least the cause of her distress. "But perhaps you can help me with something else."

"Pray, be seated. Tell me all about it," Lucia said, apparently unconscious of Elizabeth's errand.

Elizabeth sat and removed her gloves. "It would appear that my new tenant has arrived on an earlier train than I had thought."

Lucia raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?" She leaned back in her chair. "I seem to recall yesterday you mentioning the 3:20 as the conveyance by which you expected her."

"I suppose I may have misheard you," Lucia added, her tone belying the suggestion.

Elizabeth abruptly realised that she had, indeed, made that statement. In her fury over Lucia's preemptive strike against her (by absconding with Mrs. Blanchard) she had forgotten all about it.

Elizabeth smiled broadly. "No doubt that is it. We are all getting older. May I suggest a syringe for all that ear wax?"

"Thank you for that useful suggestion, dear. By the way," Lucia continued, hearing a heavy step on the stair, "I was at the rail station this afternoon, and who do you think I bumped into?"

The door opened and Mrs. Blanchard entered, with Georgie tagging along behind.

"Lucia," Mrs. Blanchard said, "Would you believe they told me that Mrs. Mapp-Flint is not at home? She told me she would see me settled in. I call that rather odd."

Lucia rose and laughed. "My dear Mrs. Blanchard, your search is over. Elizabeth has been wandering the streets for you, and I have dragged her in here out of the alley."

Elizabeth chaffed under this patronising attitude, but decided that, just at this moment, propitiating her long-lost lessee was more important than scoring points off Lucia. "Mrs. Blanchard! At last!" she cried, and rose to greet her.

"Mrs. Mapp-Flint? How nice! I trust you met my secretary, Miss Thalman? Such a lovely young woman, is she not? I simply had to bring her along, I cannot possibly function without her guidance. I know I informed you that I would be here on the late train, but my steamer got in early, so I decided to take the first train here."

Lucia gave Elizabeth a look which flashed triumphantly but kept her silence. Elizabeth's deceit was now fact. And Elizabeth knew that she knew.

Mrs. Blanchard continued. "I adore England, though I detest these new, cramped steamers. It's like going to prison with the added chance of being drowned. Oh, how I miss those grand old ships: the Olympic was a dream."

"Mr. and Mrs. Pillson and I have just had our tea. Such a lovely convention; I wish it were more common in America. But, alas, I suppose that I would be even larger than I am now if I were to have four meals a day."

Elizabeth started at the implication her own ample frame was due to overeating. Surely Mrs. Blanchard

had not intended to insult her? Elizabeth recovered almost instantly, and was once again wreathed in smiles. She attempted her best to seduce the talkative woman away from the garden room, and it was by sheer force of will that she finally succeeded in interrupting this impressive monologue to suggest that she herself would like nothing better than to remain and chat, but she really needed to finish vacating Grebe, and if Mrs. Blanchard would allow her, she would be more than happy to take the time right now to inspect the house.

The inspection turned out to be a bitter experience, as Mrs. Blanchard had been enchanted with Mallards when she had been given a tour by Lucia (as Mrs. Blanchard informed her), but was clearly less so with Grebe. The explanation that Mallards had, in fact, been Elizabeth's ancestral home seemed a pointless observation to make since Elizabeth no longer owned it, and therefore Mrs. Blanchard was not renting it, but she made it anyway.

Mrs. Blanchard appeared unimpressed at Elizabeth's views on her own high standing in town (Mayoress for three years), and even less interested in her views regarding the other inhabitants. Elizabeth had intended to run down the principle characteristics and foibles of the rest of Tilling Society, so that Mrs. Blanchard might be prepared for their little idiosyncrasies when she first met them, and not assume (for example) from his queer dialect that the Padre was from somewhere other than Birmingham, or that quaint Irene in her fisherman's jersey was not of Society.

And if all this gruel wasn't sour enough to be forced to swallow in one afternoon, there was the matter of the garden produce. Elizabeth had stood firm with many a tenant, and had virtually never failed to procure at least a small bit of leverage when it came to face-to-face negotiations. But Mrs. Blanchard had somehow steamrolled directly over her and had gotten the produce for free. Exactly the opposite of the way it had always been. Elizabeth had always gotten the upper hand. But then, that was before Lucia had descended upon Tilling in a cloud of mephitic vapour. With no one else except herself to blame, Elizabeth decided Lucia's presence these past few years had dulled her own negotiating skills. Like many other aspects of their relationship, Elizabeth found the situation both intolerable, but knew herself to be impotent to do anything about it.

Lucia was humming to herself as she finished making out her invitation for Mrs. Blanchard to join the Literary Society. She did not ask her to bring along something to recite; that would perhaps be asking a bit much for a guest. Instead, she simply hoped that Mrs. Blanchard might number herself among the audience at Mallards in two days' time. Lucia felt Mrs. Blanchard would still be a new enough attraction on Thursday

that she would serve as suitable enticement for her remaining friends.

Lucia felt the initial visit had gone quite well. Both her desire to ingratiate herself with Mrs. Blanchard and her desire to infuriate Elizabeth had both succeeded quite satisfactorily. Now she could be kind to Elizabeth again. To that end, she dashed off a request from the hanging committee for Elizabeth and the Major to submit up to three works of art each for the autumn art exhibition. She need not stamp it, as Cadman, her chauffeur, would walk it next door to the Cottage.

Like it or not, for the next two months she and Elizabeth would be neighbours. Perhaps this close proximity would have a calming effect on their volatile relationship, but on that Lucia was wisely placing no bets.

She got up from her desk and moved to the couch, bringing with her a large, heavy book from her library. Her discussion with Georgie in the garden regarding some sort of outdoor temple to the poets appealed to her. Certainly less grand than say, the Arch of Septimius in Rome; yet that sort of ancient, weathered look appealed to her. Perhaps a miniature gazebo or pavilion which looked like a tiny Roman ruin could be rather attractive. She had that plaster replica of the British Museum's bust of Hadrian in an upstairs bedroom which might look very pleasant if arranged to appear artfully fallen from its pedestal. Of course, it would have to be bronzed to protect it from the weather. She picked up a ledger and began jotting down ideas and composing rough sketches. Once she was finished with her preliminary ideas, she would have to speak to the local carpenters and see what their schedule would permit.

Reviewing her basic outline after the first hour, she supposed that, even if she omitted the double colonnade entrance and the workers did not stop for tea, that they would nevertheless be unable to complete it in two day's time for the impending literary circle. She sighed and erased the canopied entrance. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced her retreat must demonstrate the virtues of simplicity.

"A setting which encourages contemplation, I think," she explained to Georgie at dinner that evening. "It mustn't be too grand, else visitors might be compelled to wander through it instead of using it as a retreat in which to reflect."

Georgie was mildly intrigued, but he was not looking forward to workmen tramping through the house for the next few weeks, awakening him at the crack of dawn with their hammers and chisels.

"I should bet our new next door tenants will not be amused to hear such clattering and banging. Why not wait until October?"

Lucia put down her soup spoon. "But what would be the point of constructing it at all if I cannot put it to

use this summer? No: poor Elizabeth and the Major will just have to put up with it. I am, after all, erecting this edifice for the good of the community and the solace of the human soul."

Georgie stifled a yawn. "I see. In that case, you should perhaps consider sending round a collection plate, as you seem to view this new pavilion as a public work. Or better yet, use your position as Mayor to invest Mallards as a national treasure. Perhaps you could bequeath it to the National Trust and get them to pay the water rate."

"Don't be silly, or I shan't talk to you about it any more."

"Suit yourself," he replied smugly.

Lucia sat for a few moments, surveying her turtle soup and decided that, on the surface at least, Georgie appeared not to be supporting her in her latest endeavour. Very well, then. She could certainly manage it on her own. And once completed, she wouldn't be small about it: she would offer him equal credit when the congratulations were handed about.

Georgie toyed with his asparagus. "Would I have to move my croquet hoops?" he asked thoughtfully.

Taking firm hold of this signal indicating that he was preparing to be wooed over to her side by her eloquence, Lucia erupted into the mixture of Italian and baby talk in which they often spoke to each other. "Of course not, cam. Poor widdle Georgino mio shall not have to lift a finger. Lucia will do whole thing.

"Should I describe my plans for un po' di piccolo sanctuary?"

Georgie heaved a sigh and caved. "Me vewy naughty boy not to come to aid of poor Lucia."

Lucia smiled, relieved. The project was now to be much easier with her husband's support. She instantly assumed a brisk, business-like tone. "Very well, then. Pay attention."

As Lucia began describing her dream pavilion, Georgie became more and more fascinated. There was an abrupt interruption in the narrative when, waving her hands to illustrate the balustrade which was to line the second floor gallery, she knocked over her water glass. And there was a second pause as they retired to the garden room for coffee and to allow Lucia to show Georgie the rough sketches she had made.

"As we know, Romanesque architecture entered its third phase — the High Romanesque phase — around one thousand A.D., with the construction of St. Etienne in Caen, which was patronised by William the Conqueror himself."

"Really?" said Georgie, "I didn't know that."

"Don't interrupt, Georgino mio. Now, I am not prepared to design in arbitrarily juxtapositioned patterns simply to appease the classicists among us —"

"No?" asked Georgie, hopelessly lost.

"But I do think perhaps a few flying buttresses, a diaphragm arch or three, and perhaps an arcade might

be suitable."

"I thought it was to be a Roman ruin, not a monastery."

"Georgie, when have you ever known me to think small? It is the broad stroke, the sweeping epic which fascinates the onlooker. In this particular case, I do not believe in subtlety."

"All the same, I think it is a monstrous project for you. Are you going to postpone the literary circle until it is finished?"

"Impossible, I'm afraid. I've already sent out the invitations. I think the garden room will be a suitable enough venue. It has never let us down before."

"Have you talked to the carpenters yet? And are you going to hire an architect?" asked Georgie.

"I shall venture out tomorrow morning during shopping, I think. You will accompany me of course? You know how I rely on your exquisite tastes."

"Certainly."

Lucia moved over to the open piano. "Thank you. And now, a little trifle of Scarlatti, perhaps?"

That was Lucia through and through. Not one to gloat over her successes (having won over Georgie was only a minor triumph of course, as he was rather easy to persuade) she merely went on about her way, and let others discuss her achievements.

Then, too, one might be expected to think that an afternoon composed of outmanoeuvring Elizabeth, having tea with a complete stranger, and wrestling with a large book on Classical architecture along the way to planning a monument would have been enough for any woman. But Lucia was not, as the astute reader has already discerned, just any woman. She had been justly described as terrible to deal with, but also as enormously fascinating to be involved with — at a distance, naturally. She managed to stir up all sorts of feelings, which in Georgie included loyalty and (occasionally) onus. His capitulation in the matter of the new Roman ruins, therefore, could be viewed as equal measures of interest in her latest fad, desire to mollify her lest she devise some worse project with which to inconvenience him, and guilt over not having immediately supported his wife in her latest enterprise. Georgie joined his wife on the piano stool and they began.

Major Benjy was sorry he had returned home early from the club, although he told Elizabeth he had been golfing. It really was unfortunate that such an otherwise fine woman should have such a single-minded fixation upon one simple habit: his enjoyment of an occasional whiskey and soda.

He considered the Cottage to be a tight fit for the household, made even more so by Elizabeth's hawk-

like manner of late. She seemed positively obsessed with alcohol. Or, rather, his consumption of same. What good was being an old military campaigner, having fought for his country, if he wasn't entitled to a character flaw or two?

He ruminated over his predicament as he unpacked the good plate. The set he was placing in the dining room cupboard was Elizabeth's Crown Derby, a gift (she had said) from her great-aunt Caroline. It seemed surprising to him that any aunt, great or no, should have owned quite so many things about the house which seemed of a newer vintage than was likely for a woman who had assumedly died so long ago. And the service seemed not quite worth the trouble for Elizabeth to have insisted that he, and not Withers, unpack it. Still, he supposed it was possible it was more valuable than it looked. Besides, once the plate was safely stored, he could go back to deciding where to secret the remaining bottles of his personal collection. Perhaps the garden would offer a promising cache or two. There was that pedestal in the centre of the garden with a bust of what the Major had been told was some chap going by the name Neapolitan Narcissus. Quite a silly thing: just the sort of nonsense which that Miss Georgie Milliner Michael Angelo Pillson would have in his garden. Sometimes he really didn't know how Lucia could stand the chap.

"What? Not finished yet Benjy? You're dawdling."

"Eh? What's that?" The Major turned to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway of the dining room, her hands on her hips. "Course I'm not finished. Don't want to break anything."

"Well hurry along, dear. We are due at Mallards in an hour and you're not even dressed."

"Dressed? Dash it all, it's one of those damn poetry recitals, girlie. I'm not really keen on those, you know." He patted his torso somewhere near what he hoped was the area of his liver. "And I fancy a bilious attack coming on. Per'aps I'd best stay behind."

"Don't be ridiculous. You've had two days to dream up an excuse not to go, and that's the best you can do? I'm not about to leave you behind to pickle yourself."

"Steady on, now girlie. And what's all this about drinking? You've had spirits on the brain for a week now. It's time you got interested in other things. What about the picture exhibition: isn't that coming up soon? What's the matter with painting a few flowers in the garden? Or didn't they ask you again?"

"As a matter of fact," Elizabeth said, her tone bordering on brittle, "they have asked me to submit sketches. And they have also asked you. I read you Lucia's invitation when I received it. I wonder why you don't remember?" she asked in a tone full of menace. If his condition had contributed to his forgetfulness, that was yet another strike against fire water.

"Now, now. I'm sorry," he said, wondering how he

managed to find himself perennially apologising. "If you said that Mrs. Pillson asked us both to submit sketches, I believe you. So let's hear no more about that, shall we? Er, when is this little get-together today?"

"She is serving dinner at precisely eight o'clock in the garden room. And Lucia told me this morning that Mrs. Blanchard has also accepted an invitation."

"Then I don't think you — ur, we — ought to go. If the woman hasn't the decency to let you know which train she is arriving on, I say: Pshaw!"

She decided to forgive the Major this one time for forgetting about the invitation from the hanging committee. She reached over and planted a kiss on his cheek, then retired upstairs to dress, leaving behind a very bewildered husband.

Unknown to the Major, Elizabeth had already considered snubbing Lucia this late in the day, but had decided against it. If it had been a bridge party, there would definitely have been an advantage in suddenly bowing out and ruining a table of four hands. As it was, there had been no mention of bridge.

The other consideration was Mrs. Blanchard. Elizabeth knew Lucia had already gotten her daws into that woman. Left unchaperoned, it was likely the association kindling between those two could ignite into an impenetrable wall of fire, blocking out everyone else. And it wasn't fair: she herself had been the one who found Mrs. Blanchard. All the way from America, too. It wasn't right that Lucia should just step in and walk away with her. True, Mrs. Blanchard had not shown herself to be an exceptionally good woman so far with regard to the garden produce, yet Elizabeth held out hope.

She had invited Mrs. Blanchard to tea yesterday, and the woman had been very pleasant. Opinionated, but pleasant. They had touched on all sorts of subjects, like hummingbirds sipping at flowers, and Elizabeth never once alluded to the fresh tomatoes which Mrs. Blanchard brought along with her as a gift.

So, since she had not yet made an enemy of Mrs. Blanchard (although, like a prudent woman, she liked keeping her options open), perhaps Mrs. Blanchard could be recruited in the ridicule campaign Elizabeth was prepared to wage against Lucia's Temple. Elizabeth had heard quite an earful this morning in the High Street. There she had been, minding her own business popping in and out of the shops with her marketing basket upon her arm, exchanging pleasantries with the other ladies, when Lucia came out of the grocer's and announced her intention to erect a sacred structure.

At the time, Elizabeth had wanted to heap derision on her Lucia once claimed to have found a Roman Temple under the cellars of Mallards, the existence of which naturally turned out to be only so much smoke. But Elizabeth was magnanimous and said nothing, an

event Diva later remarked as showing a maturity which was a refreshing change. Elizabeth felt vexed enough at that comment that she didn't bother attempting to explain to Diva that her silence was merely due to the fact on occasion she found it difficult to be clever and cutting so early in the day.

Elizabeth decided that some common ground was the crucial ingredient required to win over Mrs. Blanchard. And there seemed ample acreage when it came to Lucia and her silly schemes.