

### Chapter 3

Lucia was dressed by half-past seven in order to give herself ample time to make a final review of the preparations for dinner. As she emerged from her bedroom, she was pleased to see Georgie appear at that moment from his own suite as well, having been just as prudent in dressing a few minutes early. He had on his light plum coloured dinner outfit with a new ivory waistcoat. Lucia thought it looked lovely, and told him so. He thanked her and they descended the broad staircase together, pausing at the looking glass on the landing so that Georgie could be certain his tie was straight.

By providing dinner to her literary guests, Lucia had dearly hedged her bets in case Mrs. Blanchard had not proved enough of an enticement in and of herself. Naturally, Lucia did not view it in such a stark light, like the glare from a bare electric bulb. Instead, she veiled it in the most altruistic manner.

"I shall enjoy serving dinner for the first meeting tonight," she said to Georgie as they resumed their descent.

"To christen the event, like a ship." Georgie replied, adding a comment about the *Lusitania* which Lucia considered quite inappropriate, as her guest had to traverse the Atlantic on just that sort of steamer.

They were still discussing the matter when the front doorbell rang. The grandfather clock in the hall showed it was a full fifteen minutes before eight o'clock and Lucia wondered who it could be. Perhaps Mrs. Blanchard had misjudged the time it took to get here from Grebe.

She waited at the bottom of the stairs with Georgie while Grosvenor answered the door. Her conjecture appeared to be accurate, as Mrs. Blanchard stepped into the hall.

"Mrs. Pillson!" cried Mrs. Blanchard, "I decided to get here a bit early in case you needed some help in setting up for dinner. I've brought along a tomato salad I made from the ones in Mrs. Mapp-Flint's garden — there's quite too many vegetables in her garden, even for someone with my appetite."

Lucia froze a smile on her lips. She had never, in her wildest imaginings, considered that someone would be rude enough to show up early on purpose. "Good evening. Won't you please come in. You remember my husband, Mr. Pillson."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pillson. Yes, indeed. And I've brought along my secretary. I simply couldn't leave her behind. She's my life's blood. I hope you don't mind." Mrs. Blanchard stepped aside to reveal her petite employee. Lucia exchanged a quick glance with Georgie. "Why, of course I don't mind," she said in a tone which failed to conceal a slightly brittle edge. "Grosvenor, set an extra place for Miss Thalman."

Grosvenor accepted the covered dish from Mrs. Blanchard and glided off toward the dining room.

"Please call me Lucy, Mrs. Pillson," the young woman said, showing as firm a lack of manners as her patroness.

There was an awkward pause. Mrs. Blanchard spoke first. "I see that I am inconveniencing you Mrs. Pillson, by having neglected to ask if I might bring a guest. I am so sorry. We shan't stay. It is easy to be certain a dinner casserole will be adequate for one less at the table than it would be for one more."

Lucia felt a rise of panic. What would her friends say if she refused an uninvited guest? She would be labelled a terrible hostess, which was far worse than being a boorish guest. That would never do. She would simply place the blame for lax manners on the rampant permissiveness of the Colonies and be done with it. She was determined, no matter what else happened, to be a charming hostess. For the first time, Lucia began to consider whether she had made a mistake in appropriating this American. Lucia made a small effort and laughed in her characteristic silvery tones.

"Mrs. Blanchard, it would be a pleasure to entertain Miss Thalman here this evening. I am certain there is more than enough food. And since you were so kind to bring along a dish yourself, that will certainly guarantee enough. And the servants have taken care of everything. Really, there is no more to do. Now, please, shall we adjourn to the garden room while we wait for our other guests?"

Lucia's remaining guests were punctual in their arrival: two minutes past eight for the Wyses, a few more for the Padre and wee wifie, and three more for Elizabeth and the Major, followed closely by Irene.

And despite her tiff with Lucia, Diva appeared for dinner wreathed in apologies for her tardiness, apparently unconscious that for the past week she had been unable to perceive Lucia's presence. "I'm so sorry, Lucia. It was a busy afternoon and I just managed to close up and rush here. Evening, Elizabeth. New dress?"

Elizabeth smiled prettily and said, "Thank you, dear, but I've worn this on a few other occasions. But then we've seen so little of you lately, it is quite possible that you might not have seen it."

"I would think anyone would remember it," Diva said, taking in the melon-and-white striped gown.

Mrs. Blanchard nodded her approval. "Yes, that sort of cut never goes out of style. And stripes are so slimming, aren't they?"

"Indeed," chimed in Mr. Wyse, peering through his monocle and bowing in Elizabeth's direction, "I recall it from the last dinner party at our Starling Cottage. It is indeed a handsome piece, if one may be permitted to say so."

"Thank you," Elizabeth cooed, and turned to her hostess. "And you, my dear, also have on display an

interesting outfit. Pray what is it?"

Through her Classical studies for the pavilion, Lucia had unconsciously chosen a surplice-like dress of fine white brocade which suggested the robes of the Greek and Roman philosophers. Perhaps slightly less unconscious was her choice of a wreath of laurels as a headpiece. "Oh, this one truly is just an old dress of mine." She added, "I am so glad you like it."

Elizabeth was not prepared to go that far, and would have certainly have corrected this misapprehension if Mrs. Blanchard had not been standing next to her. Instead, she simply smiled, showing all her teeth. Dinner was served.

"Claret?" Georgie asked Mrs. Blanchard.

Mrs. Blanchard placed her hand on her breast. "Oh, dear me. It is still difficult to get used to not having members of the Anti-Saloon league decrying the use of alcohol."

Georgie looked at her in surprise. "But hasn't the American Prohibition been abolished for years now?"

"Yes. Alcohol is again available in all forty-eight states. I'm just not used to it. And yes, I'd love some. So would Miss Thalman, I expect."

Miss Thalman looked up demurely. "Yes, please."

"Better fill up Benjy-boy's glass, too," quipped Irene, her mouth filled with a savoury. "Before the Prohibition police find out, eh Mapp?" She looked across the table at Elizabeth, who only smiled at this pitiful stab.

"Naughty. Of course the Major may have a glass of wine with his dinner if he desires one. A small glass. But I think he would actually prefer some lemon barley water."

The Major looked aghast. "Ton my soul, wine will do the trick, thank you."

"No Bacchus celebrations tonight, eh Major?" Irene continued on remorselessly. Lucia gave Irene a warning look, but said nothing. Mrs. Blanchard, who did not see the exchange of glances, spoke up.

"Do not be too harsh a judge of poor Bacchus —"

"Yes. In Italian he goes by the name Liber," Lucia said, interrupting with this non sequitur to show off her Italian. Elizabeth glared at Lucia, but like Lucia's handling of Irene, said nothing. Mrs. Blanchard's presence was beginning to feel a bit stifling.

Mrs. Blanchard continued. "He became the centre of the belief in immortality, you know. He always rose from the dead each spring. It is said of him that he is life-giving, and the healer of every ill." She turned to Elizabeth. "So do not begrudge your husband a sip from that sweet nectar of life, Mrs. Mapp-Flint."

Irene resounded in unkindly laughter, and Elizabeth's face began flushing red. "Mrs. Blanchard, you misunderstand me. Naturally I would never begrudge my Benjy-boy anything his heart desired."

"Do you hear, Major? Drink up," Mrs. Blanchard said, raising her glass in a toast. They all followed suit.

Benjy swallowed his in one gulp, winked at Mrs. Blanchard, and motioned to Grosvenor for a refill.

The rest of the dinner was eaten in relative tranquillity, though Lucia began feeling rather put out. Her manner of dress and her decided harping upon the great poets and philosophers of the Classical ages with carefully-worded allusions to Roman theatre staging and Greek tragedies had not produced the effect she was accustomed to. She had intended that all her talk would inevitably lead to discussion of the outdoor piazza she was designing. Irene had probably already heard about it, and had done her best to steer the conversation there with her talk of Bacchus. Alas, instead of following her lead and discussing Plato and the Emperor Claudius, her guests seemed entranced with Mrs. Blanchard. Whatever she spoke of became the topic of conversation. True, Lucia had begun the dinner by indulging her, but she had not expected the woman to take centre stage and then not return it. Her assessment of Mrs. Blanchard was experiencing a precipitous and rather rapid nosedive.

The Wyse spoke of their journey to Capri to visit Mr. Wyse's sister, with its vineyards and orange groves, as they always did after a solar sojourn there. But Mrs. Blanchard, instead of being bored by such talk, asked which steamer they had taken, and by what route. With the padre, she easily discoursed on the trails of local parish life, while with Diva she discussed cooking techniques. Georgie talked about the hidden bibelots one could find tucked away in dusty corners of curio and jewellery shops, and the Major, sounding more and more self-satisfied by the minute, told her about the time he supposedly shot a tiger in India.

As her mesmerising skills became clearer and clearer during dinner, Lucia's frustration had her almost wishing Mrs. Blanchard was actually a native of Hamelin, and would soon produce a hornpipe, and lead all her guests down to the riverbank to drown them. Lucia felt certain she could avoid the siren's song (for hadn't she done so successfully all evening?) and would follow at a discrete distance to insure that Mrs. Blanchard would be the final victim of that en masse drowning accident. As Lucia surveyed her table, the only other person present who appeared to have avoided being taken in by this newcomer was Elizabeth: hardly a comforting thought.

Lucia's guests, having impressed themselves with their own imagined ability to impress Mrs. Blanchard, finally dispersed, with the women retiring to the garden room to suffer through Lucia treading snippets from a minuet and lecturing to them about Socrates from Diogenes Laertius, while Georgie offered the menfolk access to the liquor in the dining room.

The men eventually had their fill (and, in the case of the Major, more than his fill) and they reformed back into a single group in the garden room. A group of straight-backed chairs were arranged in a semi-circle,

where Grosvenor had added a chair for Miss Thalman. Unlike the first literary circle six months previous, there was very little suspense. Instead, the guests all appeared rather distracted from Lucia's opening speech by the new (albeit temporary) Tillingite. Mrs. Blanchard continued talking to Irene about the Da Vinci school of painting for quite some time before she realised that Lucia was standing at the makeshift lectern by the piano, whereupon she promptly faced forward and straightened her dress, her attention fixed fully upon their hostess.

In Lucia's opening speech she thanked everyone for appearing, then moved on to the purpose of the evening.

"In that magnificent epic the Iliad, Homer wrote that one should be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds. We are here tonight to celebrate the first half of that mantra. We are gathered here to celebrate the written word. Each of us is gifted by the gods in our own way, in our own manner. We have devised this method of sharing our original thoughts, a structured gathering of friends to announce our innermost desires. Our own, personal passions."

Lucia went on for some time, in fine form. Determined to eclipse Mrs. Blanchard's obvious parlour tricks (her ability to appear genuinely interested in her fellow dinner guests), she would easily contrast that woman's banal conversations with high principles and noble aspirations, and even the least astute of those assembled would instantly see through that woman's schemes.

So intent was she on her spiritually uplifting monologue, that she managed to lose just about every member of her audience at one time or another, but gamely plunged ahead. She distinctly thought that the Major fell asleep once, and that Elizabeth nudged him. He certainly gave a start in the midst of one of her most eloquently fashioned sentences.

The preamble was finally at an end, and Elizabeth rose to the podium, thanking the benefactress who made this evening possible. Then she read her poem.

"Existence awaits us in all things,

"It does not hasten its own delivery nor constrain it,

"It does not require the blunt surgery of the doctor,

"Nor the finesse of the seamstress, in order to be beheld by the virtuous.

"Life and love never bestow faith in degrees,

"They await any with the temerity to pursue.

"Rescued from the night despite the yearnings of my soul.

"Only that which can be proved by concurrent acts is true.

"Only that which we all desire is so."

There was a lengthy pause as the assembled listeners attempted to absorb the implications of this rather high-minded poetry. Finally, a voice spoke up.

"Please continue."

"Pardon?" asked Elizabeth, suddenly looking like a rabbit flushed from a thicket. "That is my entire poem."

Mrs. Blanchard sounded impatient. "Certainly not. I know it well. It continues:

"The vaguest breeze unsettles my mind as it wanders.

"We strive to rise above our torrid existence to become as one beyond the pale,

"A symphony of symphonies is the metre of a man, the soul of a woman,

"And their love is best reflected in the soul of a flower, or of an entire meadow,

"And their love continues to grow outward bound, until it cannot be held back or denied by even the most casual observer,

"And until one and all shall delight us, and we them."

As Mrs. Blanchard spoke (a touch louder than was absolutely necessary to be lucid, considered Elizabeth), Elizabeth was dimly aware of murmurings all about her as the assembled audience grew restless. She even thought she heard a suppressed giggle (from which corner it was impossible to tell).

Mrs. Blanchard continued. "It is a poem by Marvin Michaels. From his book Pages of Prose. I studied him in college long, long ago. I've kept a copy of his book at home all these years. I read it when I feel melancholy. He was a nurse in the Civil War, you know." The Major looked aghast, and glanced over at Georgie. Clearly his estimation of Mr. Michaels had just taken a plunge. "And your Mr. Tennyson liked him, too. But I was under the impression that this recital was for original works."

It was incumbent upon Lucia as hostess to come to the aid of her guest and help extradite Elizabeth from this conundrum. But she found herself at a loss for any words which could help.

For Elizabeth's part, she was outraged. Until this moment, she had not actually hated Mrs. Blanchard. She had been prepared, instead, to assume an air of malevolent indifference. But Mrs. Blanchard clearly had meant this to be an act of war (Elizabeth reasoned): she had meanly thrown down the gauntlet of exposure into this most public of arenas. And Mrs. Blanchard was quite naive indeed if she assumed Elizabeth was not prepared to accept so blatant a challenge.

"Well," said Diva, breathing life back into the group, "I thought it was lovely, even if Elizabeth didn't write it. Perhaps she was confused over the rules of the

recital. Or forgot."

Irene snorted. Even the Wyses looked a bit askance at this tissue veil of improbability. But they added their voices to the general murmuring congratulations at the skill of the orator.

Lucia's recital was next, but after Elizabeth's hi-jinx, A Walk with Plato was not the catalyst for erudite discussion which Lucia had hoped.

The following day, as Elizabeth prepared to descend into the High Street for her morning marketing, she felt uncharacteristically timid. The events of the previous night had left her shaken. Never before had she been unable to mount an effective campaign against an interloper. True, Lucia thought that Elizabeth had capitulated her seat as supreme arbiter of Tilling, but poor Lucia lived in her own little dream world.

Elizabeth was still the true monarch of her little kingdom, and was prepared to do battle in the High Street (if necessary) or in the back parlours (when called upon). She felt she had handled last night's fiasco with tact and diplomacy. She had behaved in all respects like a true lady. She had not clawed at Mrs. Blanchard when that woman had thanked her for an amusing evening, nor made a face when the woman finally walked out the front door. Curse the coincidence which caused Mrs. Blanchard to be an aficionado of that obscure little poet. Just because the book was bound in American cloth was no indication that it was an American edition. After all, Lucia's cookbook was bound in similar material. While she had also cribbed from that volume (a recipe in this case), she would never have imagined the similarities would not end there... It was small solace to consider the possibility that owning an old edition of a (presumably) well-known author meant it was worth a few pounds.

Elizabeth was beginning to feel as if Mrs. Blanchard had appeared over the horizon like the army of the Visigoths appeared to the Roman Emperor Honorius. But unlike that unlucky sovereign, she was not about to capitulate to a foreign body. Honorius had been merely the ruler of ancient Rome, while she was still (at least in her own mind) the Queen of Tilling.

She shook herself from their reverie of things Roman, brought on no doubt by Lucia's incessant harping on the subject last night, and launched herself into the High Street.

There was Diva, marketing basket in hand, traversing the tradesmen's shops. Elizabeth approached her with a fixed smile.

"Any news?"

"Morning, Elizabeth. Did you get yours yet?"

"My what?"

"Your invitation to Mrs. Blanchard's. Oh, dear. Haven't you been invited, I wonder?"

"No doubt it will be awaiting me on my hall table on my return."

"Most likely," Diva had to admit, then a bright idea struck her. "Or perhaps she feels embarrassed at having exposed you last night and doesn't wish to further demean you."

This allusion to her deceitful antics the previous evening hardened Elizabeth's heart. She had been grateful to Diva for jumping to her defence last night, but Elizabeth never allowed thankfulness to restrict her subsequent actions. She was glad not to be that shallow. "Exposed me, dear? Whatever do you mean?" Diva didn't bother explaining as they both knew precisely what she was talking about. "Anyhow, it's an invitation to a costumed ball. I think I shall go as — no, I shan't tell you."

The time-honoured tradition of rivalry in matters of dress between Elizabeth and herself compelled Diva to omit the theme for her costume. If she said anything, she was certain that Elizabeth would somehow manage to score off of it, either by parodying it or something worse. Of course, there was always the slim chance that they would both have the same idea and appear in identical outfits. There was certainly precedent for that in the past. But Diva felt that her choice was obscure enough (a costume composed in the main of black and yellow) that not even Elizabeth would manage to foul it up.

Elizabeth managed to look bored, though she was brimming with curiosity. "As you wish, Diva dear. I won't press you. I would suggest, though, making sure you attire yourself in a manner which will not draw attention to your deficiencies."

"My deficiencies? Isn't it fortunate that I have so few. Compared to yourself, that is."

They both stood for a moment, revelling in their witty sarcasms. Diva turned a little and examined the fresh fruit on display in front of Twistevant's. She selected several pieces.

"Oh, and I've decided not to try and get the art exhibition for my tea shop."

"Yes. Wise of you, since they have already rejected your request."

"Nice of you to notice, dear. Hope you get that invitation," Diva said in a monotone, and disappeared into the shop to pay for her purchases.

Elizabeth was delighted. Mrs. Blanchard had managed to obliterate last night's tragedy by brilliant generalship. Issuing invitations to a costume ball had taken everyone's mind off Marvin Michaels. Of course, if Diva had already received her invitation, that meant Mrs. Blanchard had sent them out the previous evening, before dinner. Elizabeth smoothed over this little inconsistency by supposing that the woman realised that she often made foolish blunders at parties, and therefore was determined to forestall any recrimination for future misunderstandings by sending forth these

glad tidings. How astute that woman was when it came to her own shortcomings!

It was thus with a light step that she made her purchases. A hoot from a kerb-side Royce made her start. But instead of silently cursing the passengers, she walked over to the open window.

"Good morning, Susan. Mr. Wyse." She noted that Mrs. Wyse had not donned her fur coat for this outing. Unusual for her, but it was likely to become ninety degrees before the afternoon was over.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mapp-Flint," Mr. Wyse said, bowing. "Any news?"

"None worth repeating. Oh!" Elizabeth gave a start as if she had just recollected a trivial matter. "I hear that Mrs. Blanchard is hosting a costumed ball."

Susan smiled. "Yes. Algernon and I have just received her kind invitation. It is difficult to know what one wears to such an event. We have been discussing it all morning." She turned and gave an affectionate look at her husband.

"It has been suggested," Mr. Wyse said, "that a suitable costume might perhaps be someone out of the historical or literary circles. Possibly someone a little less-known than the more common names: Shakespeare, and so on." He bowed in what Elizabeth guessed to be the general direction of Stratford-on-Avon.

"Yes," Elizabeth agreed. She idly wondered how uncommon Marvin Michaels was, and assured herself that the Major would never be cajoled to dress in anything but his old military uniform or his Sunday best.

"Well, we must be off, Elizabeth. May we give you a lift to the shops? This heat is such a strain."

"No thank you, Susan dear. I'm afraid I am headed in the opposite direction. Enjoy your shopping." Mr. Wyse nodded his goodbye and issued a command into the speaking tube. She waved as the ponderous vehicle continued down the street a mere ten feet and stopped at Twistevant's door, whereupon the worthy proprietor came out and took their order.

Elizabeth watched this flagrant abuse of power. After all, the Wyses often ordered the most expensive — Elizabeth caught herself from using the word "best" — cuts of meat and the rarest of fowl. It was no wonder that the shop keepers tolerated Susan's impertinence in expecting them to wait upon her as she sat in her motor.

Elizabeth was still stewing this over when she was hailed by the padre and his wife.

"Good morn' mistress Mapp-Flint. Any news?"

"Good morning padre. Evie. No, nothing worth discussing."

"Ach, then did yea nought receive an invite to yon Grebe?"

"Oh, padre! I thought you meant something interesting," Elizabeth said, not prepared to let anyone

but Diva know she had not yet received an invitation. Of course, if Diva knew about it, it was the same as bellowing the news from the top of the church tower, but still. "Mrs. Blanchard's costume ball. Yes, invitations descending all about us. Why, it reminds me of the perennial fuss over Lucia's dinner parties."

Evie squeaked her disapproval at this judgmental comment. "I think Mrs. Blanchard's party sounds rather exciting. Don't you agree, Kenneth?"

"Aye," he said, dropping his voice. "I canna remember the last time their were such a stimulation o'er a little get together. Wee wifie and I were about to return to the Vicarage an' look through the attics for suitable attire. Wearin' a kilt ha' some appeal."

As Elizabeth continued her purchases, she found herself arriving at the undesirable conclusion that the other inhabitants of Tilling were absolutely enthralled by the idea of dressing up. She, herself, considered it quite a ludicrous concept, and was somewhat vexed at not having thought of it herself.

When Lucia arrived in the High Street a few minutes later, she received the same dismal intelligences. Everyone was quite rapturous over Mrs. Blanchard — captivated by that woman's practised patter and clever invitation. Lucia felt a pang of jealousy that she had not thought of the idea of a costumed party first, but decided not to dwell on her misfortunes. She must instead concentrate on how best to avoid being sucked into this whirlpool of adoration currently being showered upon Mrs. Blanchard.

With Mrs. Blanchard's arrival everything had suddenly changed. She had upset the apple cart: nothing was as it had been. Lucia was unused to having to truckle to anyone, and now was no exception. Her destiny was to lead, not follow. It was not in her nature to ride other's coat tails, but to create her own for others to tread upon. Alas, until she figured out how best to thwart this latest challenge to her supremacy, truckling seemed her sole option.

Perhaps she would revive her Queen Elizabeth costume from a long-ago fête. And she could likely persuade Georgie to don his old Francis Drake outfit. Not troubling herself to procure a new costume might impress upon the less-astute of those gathered at the event that her opinion of the party was of such a low calibre that it did not deserve her very best. Of course, if someone (Lucia knew who) found out beforehand how little Lucia thought of it all, she might suggest to Lucia that if the party was not worthy of a new costume, perhaps it was not even worth her participation. Therefore, Lucia decided it would be best to avoid all discussion of the get-together, and refuse to divulge what she was going to wear.

She came across the culprit herself standing in front of the butcher's, in conversation with the Major.

"Good morning Mrs. Blanchard. Major Benjy. Any news?"

"Morning, Mrs. Pillson," the Major said, shifting his golf clubs to his other shoulder and tipping his cap. Mrs. Blanchard smiled. "Good morning, Mrs. Pillson. Such a lovely day, don't you think? Just visiting all the shops to see what kind of things are available in the stores on this side of the ocean."

"Any differences?"

"Oh, nothing I can't manage. I was just asking the Major if my invitations been delivered yet."

"Yes," said Lucia. "As a matter of fact, I was just discussing them with Mrs. Plaistow."

"I hope you can all come. Nothing elaborate, you understand. Just something for fun. You know, once I held a party where the men all dressed as women, and the women as men."

"How enthralling," Lucia said, appalled.

"My word!" Benjy exclaimed. "What a terrific idea." Privately, he considered it perhaps fit for Mr. Georgie, or possibly quaint Irene (who would require little, if any, change of clothes). "Not quite my speed, I'm afraid." He leaned in close to Mrs. Blanchard. "If d be quite a job getting me into a corset, what?" He guffawed. Lucia looked at him incredulously. The Major was never more boorish than when he was attempting to be charming to the fairer sex. Even Lucia was thankful that Elizabeth did not know her husband was discussing women's undergarments with a complete stranger.

Mrs. Blanchard smiled. "Don't worry about taking too many pains with your dress, Mrs. Pillson. Perhaps Mr. Pillson might come as a pirate. They are very popular this season. And so easy to do."

"I shall suggest it to him," Lucia promised, trying — and failing — to visualise Georgie's reaction to such a trite suggestion. Sir Francis Drake was generally considered to be a pirate himself, but somehow Lucia felt that this subtle distinction would escape their hostess.

"What's that?" cried the Major jovially. "Stealing my ideas, Mrs. Blanchard! Delivering them over to the enemy! Now just what am I to go as?" He winked prodigiously at her. Instead of being horrified, which Lucia felt was the proper response, she took his hand and patted it. "Now, now, Major. No use crying over spilled milk. We must put our heads together and think of something. Perhaps you could be a clown."

In Lucia's less-kind moments she considered that the Major did not need a costume to fit that description and Lucia once again found herself wishing she had been the one to suggest a costumed ball. Not pirates and clowns, but Tennyson and Shakespeare. Not women dressing as men (poor Irene!), but Plato and Sappho, Pericles and Euripides. But she dared not even suggest such a party of her own, now. Everyone would say she had cribbed the idea from the odious Mrs. Blanchard. Lucia descended back down to the present.

"On your way to the links?" Lucia asked, as if she

had suddenly become aware of Benjy's large golf bag.

"Why, yes. As a matter of fact. Every morning. Rain or shine. A manly pursuit. Helps keep me fit." He glanced at Mrs. Blanchard and patted his ample, uncorseted midsection.

Mrs. Blanchard laughed. Lucia smiled, "I'm afraid I must be on my way," she apologised. "But so nice to have this little chat. Major, I hope you win. Mrs. Blanchard, I shall look forward to seeing you again before your party."

Mrs. Blanchard thought that a delicious idea, and Lucia watched as the two turned down Malleson Street toward the tram, arm in arm.

She had ample food for thought as she walked home. For example, she tried not to consider the implications of a man the Major's age acting in a manner appropriate only to unsavoury characters who inhabited certain back streets of Whitechapel and who likely did not bathe.

Perhaps she should blame women like Mrs. Blanchard, but she knew the Major's character too well for that. Not that he was a flirt or, heaven forbid!, ever evinced even the vaguest propensity toward unfaithfulness. Not until now, that is. He had a tendency, she had noticed, to become attracted to the newest little butterfly which might flit by his field of vision and, entranced, follow it among the moors like a will o' the wisp until he was in over his head in mud and controversy. Not that she considered Mrs. Blanchard "little", by any means.

Nor was this habit restricted only to the Major. Georgie, too, had been well known to act like a schoolboy whenever the prima donna, Olga Shuttleworth, was in town. Olga had a power over him that few women possessed. She, of course, appeared just as enthralled with him, despite the fact that she, like Georgie, was married.

But getting back to the point, should she warn Elizabeth? It was unlikely she would take heed of such a warning: she would be more likely to consider the messenger and not the message. No, it was none of her business. For once, Lucia decided to be noble and keep her nose out of someone else's affairs. That is, until something really interesting developed. And judging from the attitude of those two in the High Street, something was bound to come out of it.

Mentally switching gears (not very far, as all things somehow led back to Mrs. Blanchard), she once again considered that her snare to draw in her guests last night had worked too well. So well, in fact, that Elizabeth's usual scheming had drawn no comment this morning. That is, until she herself had brought it up. But it held only the briefest of interest for Diva and the Wyses, before the ball and Mrs. Blanchard eclipsed the previous night's events.

And then, of course, she still had not managed the proper venue for broadcasting of her plans for her

poet's corner. She had best announce it soon, for the architect's plans had been finished for some time, and the raw materials had been delivered to the garden two days ago. The carpenters were scheduled to begin today. If all went well, the construction should be concluded in two week's time.

Dropping off her purchases with Grosvenor on her way into the house, Lucia decided to wander out back and see how the workmen were getting along. She soon discovered that they weren't. In fact, there was no one at all out in the garden. The lumber was stacked neatly out past the greenhouse — just where it had been delivered — and the building site had been pegged off with cords and carefully levelled. But the men she had hired to begin merrily hammering and sawing were nowhere to be found.

Perplexed, she returned to the house and rang up the offices of Stewart and Windsor. A polite gentleman with a broad accent apologised, and informed her that a previous project had run over, and that all available men were working on it.

She replaced the receiver thoughtfully. There was only one person crafty enough to have thwarted Lucia's plans. Only one who would have the nerve to, perhaps, keep them occupied by undoing what they had accomplished the previous day; or to change her mind and force them to rip out what they had half-finished, just to spite Lucia and delay her own pavilion. But how on earth had Elizabeth learned of it? Perhaps she had spotted the lumber delivery and, while not cognizant of the exact nature of the materials, had surmised that Lucia would be needing carpenters and so hired them out ahead of her.

Lucia couldn't help but marvel at that wicked mind which spent so much time and energy focused on simply frustrating others. And now Lucia felt resigned to devote some of her own precious time and energy to serving Elizabeth out. Such a colossal waste of her talents, but Elizabeth must not be allowed to get out of hand.

It suddenly occurred to her that she had not heard any work being done at the Cottage. Were they perhaps toiling in the cellar? The door to the garden banged sharply, and Lucia came out into the hall to see who it was. Georgie was standing in the Morning Room, ashen-faced, holding in his hand his painting of the sunflowers and the kitchen garden wall. He saw her and cried out, "Lucia! I shall never forgive that woman! Never! I spent this morning dusting my bibelots," Georgie explained (although it had actually been spent touching up his beard with hair dye), "and I decided to finally finish my sketch of your lovely sunflowers."

"Go on," Lucia implored, Georgie's distress nibbling away at her own usually calm demeanour. Whatever it was which had put him out, she was determined to make it right if she could.

"Well, they... Oh, that woman!" Georgie found himself unable to continue, but simply led Lucia outside, and over to the wall adjoining the Cottage. There stood the mellow brick wall and the leafy stems of the sunflowers. But the blossoms themselves had vanished. The green shoots ended abruptly and in a very final manner on a level exactly equal to the top of the wall. The inference that someone had taken some gardening shears to the flowers was indisputable.

"My sketch is ruined!" Georgie wailed, "Absolutely ruined. I can't paint those blossoms from memory. And even if I tried I am sure I would fail. That horrid woman. And my wall had turned out so well, too. Just the right tone of brick. I shall never be able to repeat that colour." Georgie realised he was babbling and fell silent.

Lucia's countenance was frightening to behold. Her face had grown flush, and her eyes glittered dangerously. She said not a word, but marched through the house and out into the street, leaving behind a forlorn Georgie. It was not likely that she was thinking pleasant thoughts regarding Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers. Nor, as she rang the bell of Mallard's Cottage, was it probable that she was considering a debate on the finer points of Goethe's classic theory on the nature of the flower. And as she waited for the bell to be answered, any hope that she was mulling over Arber's recently published treatise which elaborated upon Goethe's original theory had best be discarded.

Withers opened the door.

"Good morning," Lucia said crisply. "Is Mrs. Mapp-Flint in, please."

"I am sorry, madam. She is still out doing her marketing. I couldn't say when she'll be returning."

"I shall wait," Lucia said with such threatening finality that Withers simply led Lucia into the front parlour and left her there. Lucia was too furious to pace the room, and instead stood glaring out the front window. She was not too distracted, however, to listen for the telltale signs of workmen labouring in the catacombs beneath the building. Alas, she could hear nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps they had stopped for lunch.

Just as she was turning from the window, she spotted Elizabeth rounding the corner by Mallards toward home. Lucia moved away from the pane and sat. She counted the seconds as she waited for the front door latch to rattle. She was not disappointed, and Elizabeth entered.

"Why, Lucia! Sweet one! What a treat! But where is Withers?"

Lucia stood. "Occupied, I imagine. She let me in to wait for you."

"Oh. Well, here I am. What may I do for you, sweet Worship?"

Lucia had wanted to say, "You may begin by wiping that smirk off your face," but she held back.

Instead, she asked, "I would like an explanation of the loss of certain *Helianthus annuus* from my garden."

Elizabeth put down her marketing basket. "If you are going to speak to me in riddles, my sweet, I shan't talk to you today."

"Very well, then, I shall make myself plain."

"Why, whatever would you want to do that for? You use scarcely any makeup now, isn't that so? Just some rouge and perhaps a bit of ruddy glow on your lips." Elizabeth said, smiling.

Lucia shook from anger. "Who cut down my sunflowers?" she asked point-blank.

"Why, I did, of course."

Lucia was dazed. She had never, in her wildest imaginings expected a direct answer, never mind such a blunt confession.

"You?"

"Certainly," Elizabeth said, removing her marketing gloves. "Won't you have a seat?" She waited for a few moments, and when it appeared that Lucia was not going to, she did so herself. "You sent me an invitation to submit works of art to the hanging committee."

"Yes?" Lucia snapped, wondering what this could possibly have to do with the sunflowers in her garden.

"Well, I decided to devote my first work to the lovely nosegays in Mr. Georgie's garden here at the Cottage. Wouldn't you know it: I was deeply engrossed in my little picky when the sun began going down. As I soon realised, the best time for painting in the garden here is the afternoon. It offers the best light—Lucia tried to discern the point Elizabeth was attempting to make. She didn't have to wait long.

"So, naturally, when those dratted sunflowers blocked out the sun, I knew that you would understand if they had to go. I am entitled to as much sunlight as possible, after all. Considering the price Benjy-boy and I are being charged for such a small house. Charming, but small. Don't you agree?"

Lucia, had she not been such a lady, would gladly have smacked Elizabeth. As it was, she thought it best to leave before she ceased being such a lady.

"I will submit for your inspection a bill charging you the price of the sunflowers, as well as the cost of their care and maintenance up to this point."

"Going already? I must say this has been a short visit. You won't stay for lunch?" Elizabeth asked.

"No. And when you are finished with my carpenters, do let me know. I would like to complete my little project before the summer is over. That is," she added, "if you can spare them."

"Carpenters? I am not employing any workmen at the moment, dear Worship. I am afraid you must look elsewhere for them."

"I see. Goodbye, Mrs. Mapp-Flint."

"Good-bye Mrs. Pillson."

Lucia stood at the doorway to the Cottage for some time, collecting herself. The idea that Elizabeth would be brazen enough to admit having cut down the sunflowers galled her; that she had assumed Elizabeth was usurping her carpenters and had made that mistake plain to Elizabeth mortified her; and her impotence at being able to do anything about either situation ate away at her.

She swiftly made up her mind that the sunflower episode was really a very petty annoyance, and she must pay it little mind. She would plant some new ones, and woe to Mrs. Mapp-Flint if they should go the way of the previous victims.

But her poor Georgie must be soothed. Perhaps they could drive about this afternoon looking for other sunflowers to paint in place of the beheaded ones. She smiled at this kindness. But if the sunflowers were a minor annoyance, what was the cause of all this anger? Surely it must be because her own project was being stymied by baleful forces. If it was not Elizabeth's interference which had ruined Lucia's day, she knew who it must be who had corralled her workmen—It was an outrage that Mrs. Blanchard should have turned the entire town on its ear. It was not bad enough that her friends were all kowtowing to the new chatelaine of Grebe; now all the tradesmen were as well. She supposed that by next week she would have to ask Mr. Twistevant if he had any scraps he could throw her way, or perhaps she would need to prostrate herself at Mr. Hopkins' feet and beg for any fish heads which Mrs. Blanchard did not require for her own table.

Lucia walked the thirty yards back to her own front door and went in. One thing was quite certain: something had to be done about Mrs. Blanchard.