

thought to herself, 'but very nearly.'

She could see herself, engine exhaust billowing out behind her, navigating the hills and paths outside the town. Her enjoyment of the freedom that bicycling afforded her was only a shadow, she now knew, of the tremendous excitement it would give her to handle her own car — to be in the driver's seat and wrest ultimate control over speed and destination from such a powerful vehicle.

She was naturally astute enough to realise that the dangers of bicycling would be manifestly multiplied once the speed of the motor was taken into account. But if she was careful not to race about in an open-topped vehicle while trailing a long, flowing scarf, she felt she could easily manage to avoid Isadora Duncan's fate.

It was just those outstanding characteristics (the freedom and power — not so much the danger) which embodied all that Lucia herself believed in: she whose life was filled with such yearnings and passion for living. She knew at once that she must somehow become involved in what would appear to have the makings of an incredibly exhilarating autumn stunt. She was confident that if she would only stay her hand, circumstances would likely arise which she could use to her advantage in gaining a foothold (or a handhold) in this project. She was eager to open this new chapter in her life, and trusted that an opportunity was certain to present itself. And she would be ready to embrace that opportunity. For now, though, she would wait, and she prepared to hurry home in order to requisition a standard book or two on motor car racing from the London Library.

She glanced down as she approached the front door and spotted something vaguely familiar. There, leaning against the wall was Georgie's beautiful sunflower sketch, already finished and, indeed, already framed. Lucia nodded sagely to herself as she stepped out into the sunshine.

The Muse of Tragedy cast a mildly disapproving eye over the plans of one Mrs. Lucia Pillson, noting that she had, as usual, little concern for other's feelings. Not once had she truly considered poor Georgie's sentiments in the matter of the motorcar.

She was overreaching herself. She wished everything to go her own way. (The fact she was usually able to accomplish this feat against all odds was immaterial to the issue at hand.) But human nature did not include a wish to be led about by the nose. Perhaps it was time to throw a pair of sabots into Lucia's manufactories of pride.

For a start, the Muse raised one cosmic hand and, taking careful aim with a paintbrush, gently applied a dab of controversy to one of Lucia's pet projects. He smiled very satisfactorily and sat back to watch events unfold.

## Chapter 6

The annual meeting of the hanging committee of the Tilling Art Exhibition was of a fixed and involute pattern. The paintings would begin appearing at the Art Institute, having already visited the trainer's shop and been wrapped in protective brown paper. By the following week the pictures would have been taken out of their wrappings and lined up along one wall for inspection by the committee at noon. Once the committee approved each piece, it was assigned a place on the wall, where a carpenter hired for later that afternoon would see to its placement.

It was highly unusual for any sketch to be refused due to lack of artistic merit or questionable subject matter, and indeed this had happened only twice in recent memory, both having been nude figure studies submitted by Quaint Irene. While Mr. Wyse considered Irene's fanciful works to show great character, both Mrs. Wyse and Lucia felt that such works, though technically proficient, were not the sort of thing idle tourists would necessarily appreciate.

This ritual of art submissions and discussions which had proceeded along so smoothly the last few years (with only a very few minor bumps and jostlings — which would be expected, considering the participants) was brought up short by the transfer of the exhibit to Grebe, and Mrs. Blanchard's intrusive involvement. When the sketches began arriving, Mrs. Blanchard took it upon herself to unwrap each parcel and arrange them along the baseboard of her front hall and parlour. Naturally, she was not expected to be mute over this display of Tilling's finest of amateur works, (or in the case of Irene, professional works), and spoke her piece when the committee met in conclave that following Monday morning at ten o'clock (the accustomed starting time having been altered in deference to Mrs. Blanchard stating she had another engagement at noon).

"I think that sketch of the ships down at the harbour is exquisite," Mrs. Blanchard offered as the committee began their examination down the line. "And that one of the Landgate at dusk is superb as well. By Mrs. Bartlett and Irene Coles, respectively, I am told."

"Yes," Mr. Wyse said, bowing at each painting. "Both quite vivid."

Mr. and Mrs. Wyse, so observed Lucia, continued in this coddling manner, raving over Georgie's sunflowers and her own portrait of the Town Hall, until they came to Mrs. Blanchard's piece.

"I painted this one," Mrs. Blanchard said. "It is a picture of a picture. Quite striking, I thought."

Lucia had to agree. The painting was of a jig-saw puzzle in progress. The view was directly down upon the work, as if the puzzle itself had been framed. Here and there could be seen the green felt of Diva's card

table, and a piece of an old blue flower china set filled the largest gap — the chipped service Diva used when it was very busy at the Shop and the the pink rose set she normally used had been exhausted. The watercolour sketch was expertly fashioned and showed subtle skill at composition. Lucia detested it.

Mrs. Blanchard showed, so thought Lucia, the very first vestiges of proper social breeding when she excused herself. It was very proper that she not be present for the discussion of her own painting, especially as the attitude Lucia had already determined to display about her works was to be such a negative one. Lucia stood back with a pensive look and spoke.

"Shall I be quite frank? I see that I shall. Although we have in the past dismissed sketches due to their subject matter, never before have I felt so compelled to decline a picture due to lack of artistic merit. As much as it pains me to do so, I must vote that we reject this particular piece."

"Oh?" Mr. Wyse asked, suddenly rattled into action. He put his monocle in place and stepped forward to examine the portrait minutely. Mrs. Wyse peered at Lucia for a moment with an incredulous look, but said nothing and simply resumed her examination of the picture.

"I don't quite..." Mr. Wyse began, then paused. He stood, took a step back, and peered at it again. He finally sighed and straightened himself up. He turned to face Lucia.

"I am afraid that, for once, I cannot wholeheartedly concur with your artistic appraisal of a particular piece of work, Mrs. Pillson. It is clearly of considerable skill and talent. In my opinion, of course."

Mrs. Wyse was next. "I'm afraid I must agree with Algernon. This piece shows considerable quality and I do not see how you could possibly have come to your conclusion."

Lucia took a deep breath. "Destouches once observed that 'criticism is easy, art is difficult,' yet I feel I must take a stand against this style of mock-realism. It is all good and well that the Classics are represented here: Mr. Wyse, your still life is exquisite: that bowl of fruit seems almost real. Mrs. Wyse, your portrait of your daughter Isabel is reminiscent of the great works of Picasso. Yet there is such a thing as going too far. Mrs. Blanchard has overstepped the boundaries of art, attempting and failing, quite frankly, to capture that singularly droll school of Realism in her depiction of a jig-saw puzzle. A... a pastiche parody, if you will. Not up to our exacting standards, I'm afraid."

Mr. Wyse looked extremely uncomfortable. It was not lost on Lucia that he was the one who had on the one hand encouraged Mrs. Blanchard to submit a work, and on the other that he was responsible for agreeing to move the exhibit to Grebe without first obtaining Lucia's blessing. Lucia had counted on the Wyses' acute guilt over these past actions to help

nudge them over to her side, but was well aware that the presence of Mrs. Blanchard had upset the equilibrium of Tilling in so extreme a manner that anything might conceivably happen. She was ready.

"Of course, if you feel that you cannot side with me on this issue, perhaps my tenure as president of the art committee should come to a close. No doubt you would prefer Elizabeth return to this post. I would not begrudge you such a decision, as I certainly have no wish to be in conflict with such dear friends as yourselves."

Lucia's dear friends looked extremely uncomfortable. They correctly interpreted this as an ultimatum, yet the lure of Mrs. Blanchard was quite strong, for they wavered before replying.

"That won't be necessary, surely," Mrs. Wyse said after an awful pause. "I feel that we can come to an agreement regarding this one painting. Don't you agree, Algernon?"

"Quite, Susan," Mr. Wyse said, bowing in the direction of Mrs. Blanchard's picture.

Lucia smiled and clapped her hands together. "I am glad we are all of one mind. And we must be delicate but firm. I shall announce our decision immediately."

The Wyses were by now perspiring uncomfortably, but did not attempt to cross Lucia in this. Mrs. Blanchard took the rejection in good humour, and went so far as to agree that its style would ill-accommodate the more traditional Tilling sketches around it.

"I am not up to the skills of the true residents, I am sure," Mrs. Blanchard smiled. "It was fun, but it is just as well that my little sketch has been rejected. I would not wish to upstage anyone else's efforts." She looked pointedly at Lucia, as if challenging her to refute the comment.

Lucia smiled, perhaps a bit grimly, carefully picked up Mrs. Blanchard's sketch and handed it to her to dispose of as she saw fit. The process of picture selection continued, considerably more sedately.

"Miss Coles' submissions, for once, all appear to be in order," Mrs. Wyse said, resuming the general discussion. The tension in the room could have been cut with a knife.

"Yes," agreed Lucia, gently. "The Landgate sketch at dusk which Mrs. Blanchard commented upon; this small one which, as far as I can tell, seems to depict children playing along the cricket salts; and this rather large... abstract piece."

The three art committee members surveyed the last sketch for a few moments, attempting to decipher it without success.

"Allegorical, perhaps?" offered Mr. Wyse.

"It is labelled Queen of the Iceni," Mrs. Wyse said, referring to the committee's list of submitted works.

"An abstract compilation," decided the perplexed Lucia, momentarily wondering why Irene had not included with her submissions her picture of Boudicca,

which she had promised Lucia was being painted expressly for the exhibit. But since Irene was wont to passionately tear up sketches when the mood struck her, or to abandon a nearly-finished work when the subject matter no longer involved her emotionally, Lucia dismissed the thought.

"But it is certainly not of questionable subject matter," Mrs. Wyse said, and Lucia agreed.

The remainder of the sketches were just as lacking in controversy, which proved to be advantageous, for just after the final unanimous votes of acceptance had been cast, the front door bell rang.

Lucia had last week sent a notice to the Hastings Chronicle, inquiring if they might not like to place an announcement regarding the season opening of the Tilling Art Gallery. She mentioned in her letter that Irene Coles, a local resident and noted annual contributor to the exhibit, had recently had a painting displayed at the London Royal Academy.

Mr. Meriton had agreed, and had chosen today for his survey. Towing along a photographer, he made a polite but swift survey of the exhibit pieces and, having been informed which sketches were Irene's, instructed his photographer to snap several of Irene's largest, abstract piece.

Rather put out that he was clearly interested only in Irene's work (after all, Lucia had mentioned Irene's works simply to lure him here, so that he ideally might conduct an open-minded survey), Lucia changed her plans and decided against offering Mr. Meriton lunch at Mallards. She hoped Georgie was free, for she had ordered roast grouse, and it would be a shame for it to go to waste.

Elizabeth hardly had an easier time than Lucia. The morning post was late, being delivered after the Major had already left for his golf, and Elizabeth casually browsed the bills. She had placed them back on the salver before realising there was one with a particularly notable return address. She rummaged through them again and produced the culprit. Yes, she was correct. It was a bill from the Wine and Spirits shop on King Street. She unearched the paper knife from the bottom of the pile of letters and slit open the envelope. The bill dropped out and she unfolded it, staring at it for a few moments in disbelief, the printed page arousing in her the sort of disgusted curiosity she usually reserved for reading the newspaper police reports.

Either the proprietor had a curious gift for creative mathematics — a great deal of which would necessarily have comprised adding zeros to the ends of numbers — or the Major had been squirrelling away (or more likely imbibing) quite a bit of liquid refreshment. And not the kind to which Elizabeth at breakfast was wont to add milk and sugar.

Her face grew hot with rage, and sitting there

clutching the paper knife would likely have shrieked, "Et tu, Brute?" if she had not been so conscious of the presence of servants in the house. Julius Caesar once remarked that a wife must be above suspicion, but he never said anything about husbands.

She gnashed her teeth in impotent fury. "And all this time he was simply pretending to do as I wished!" She could not control that interloper, Mrs. Blanchard, nor it would seem — despite previous assumptions — did she really control her husband. Well, she could at least put a stop to his account at the shop.

She returned from telephoning flushed but triumphant. The proprietor of that establishment had expressed some dismay, no doubt due to the volume of business the Major had been giving him, but ultimately agreed with Elizabeth that it must stop. She wrote the cheque which would settle the rather overdue account, an amount which had been agreed upon as the weregeld whereby the good man would agree to no longer serve the Major. Elizabeth's hand shook a bit as she transcribed the astonishing price, but her resolve was firm.

Deciding to deliver the cheque in person, she was almost at the very door of the Spirits shop when she spotted the padre coming toward her, no doubt on his way home from administering to some poor parishioner.

"Good morning, padre."

"Aye, Mistress Mapp-Flint. 'Es a scorching morn', wud yee not say?"

"Yes, but we'll miss this weather once the snow arrives. Any news?"

The padre looked a bit uncomfortable, shifting from one foot to the other. "A wee bit," he said guardedly. "I saw Mrs. Blanchard traipsing about on her way to yonder tram."

"The tram to the golf links?"

"Aye. Per'aps she is takin' up the sport? T'wud be likely unusual for one of the fairer sex to take it up in earnest."

"Perhaps," Elizabeth agreed, though her tone suggested otherwise. "Well, I'm off. I was just on my way in to pick up a bottle of cooking sherry. Au reservoir." She waggled her hand to the padre and stepped into the relative coolness of the shop. This was an alarming development. Had the Major been secretly giving daily lessons to that odious woman? As she paid the Major's bill in full, she reflected on the possibility that perhaps the two lovers were meeting out on the sand dunes behind some sand trap. Amid the sounds of "fore" and curses over missed opportunities, was the Major feeling that he himself had somehow missed an opportunity in life? That would be so unlike him. He was not of a particularly volatile nature when it came to romance (Elizabeth winced self-consciously as she considered who he had agreed to marry — she herself certainly was not the romantic type), but perhaps he felt

that he was now ready for some sort of sordid dalliance. And that it should be the padre of all people who has seen Mrs. Blanchard! The spiritual guide of the parish was the last person Elizabeth would have wished to have viewed that event... No, upon reflection, that was not entirely accurate. It would have been far worse if Irene Coles had got wind of Mrs. Blanchard's forwardnesses. Not that it mattered.

Elizabeth had somehow managed to avoid any uncomfortable explanations with the padre, but she knew there was a great need for her to contrive a suitable story for any future encounters with other Tillingites. It would never do for her to appear flummoxed or anxious in the slightest degree. After all, it was no crime if the padre was correct and the Major was, indeed, teaching Mrs. Blanchard the principles of golf, just as he had attempted to do for her during their own courtship those many years ago. But who was to say that Mrs. Blanchard was not going to the clubhouse to pay for instructions, and would not engage the Major at all? Mrs. Mapp-Flint, of course. It was stretching even Elizabeth's fanciful imagination to suggest that this meeting had not been one long prearranged.

No, she would (for once) tell the truth — as far as she knew it: the Major had kindly consented to teach Mrs. Blanchard the rudiments of that sport. Her only wish was that neither participant would appear in the High Street to refute that pronouncement.

As the day progressed, it became clear that Elizabeth needn't have worried about either one of them appearing in public to dispute her carefully issued proclamation. In fact, she needn't have bothered with a proclamation at all, for neither party was seen out and about, and it was long past tea time when Elizabeth took a taxi to the golf links. The Major typically took about two hours to play a round, so Elizabeth considered three hours to be ample enough time, even were he to be towing about Mrs. Blanchard, who was certain to be a slow learner. Elizabeth enquired at the clubhouse, only to be informed that the Major had left rather early that afternoon with a finely-dressed woman. Elizabeth had to concede that the description, though obviously inaccurate, must have been describing Mrs. Blanchard.

Receiving instructions from an experienced golfer was one thing, but absconding with a retired Major was quite another. It was not the loss of the Major, per se, which was causing Elizabeth distress. After all, no one would much care if the Major were to be hit by a pantechnicon van, least of all his loving wife. No, it was the fact that Benjy was her Major, and that Mrs. Blanchard was the one stealing away his attention.

Elizabeth returned home full of menace. She countermanded the dinner she had ordered and instead had a simple tray. The Major would get no nourishment of any kind when he arrived. Elizabeth

did not yet allow herself to dwell upon the possibility that her husband might not arrive at all, instead debating how best to deal with this latest betrayal on the part of her Benjy-boy. It was soome consolation that his font of whiskey had been stopped up at the source, as there was little doubt in Elizabeth's mind that the damnable brew must be playing no small part in this charade.

She finished her meal and laid out Patience cards while she waited for the sound of the key in the lock. Mr. Georgie's ornate little cuckoo clock hanging in the front hall called out the progression of hours as Elizabeth played out game after game far into the night.

Major Benjy yawned and slowly stretched out. A vestal glow of predawn illumination was filtering through the drawn curtains as he sighed contentedly and rolled over. The sheets smelled of that rather pleasant rose soap which his wife always used, and the comfort of being in his own feather bed lulled him back into that pleasant area just on the edge of wakefulness. He smiled to himself and the movement caused him to become aware of a slight irritation at his neck. He leisurely attempted scratching at it, but encountered some obstruction. For some unfathomable reason he appeared to be wearing a starched collar.

His eyes abruptly snapped open, and he leapt from the bed as if he had been laying on live coals. For a moment, he looked about himself in abject terror but almost instantly began breathing again. There was the familiar clothing bureau against the wall, and over there the full-length cheval glass which had stood in the corner of their bedroom for years. He looked about him, momentarily relieved that he was at least in the correct house. As he looked, the realisation suddenly struck him that, although he was in the correct house, it was a house presently occupied by Mrs. Blanchard. As he looked about him in renewed horror, the glass revealed that he was not adorned in his familiar (though somewhat faded) Jaeger pyjamas but was, in fact, still dressed in the clothes which he had put on the previous morning. An awful thought struck him. He moaned and sat down heavily in the wicker chair by the door. Parting his fingers, he winced as he surveyed the bed. Only one side of the duvet — his — had been dishevelled. The other side of his matrimonial bed remained untouched. So, it was assumed, was the Major's propriety. He sighed, mumbled a fervent prayer of thanks, flew out of the room and hurled himself down the back stairs.

He looked about frantically for his jacket and cap and found them lying on one end of the sofa in the parlour. He grabbed them and noticed a silver tray on the occasional table, holding a decanter of liquor and two half-empty glasses. He shuddered. What could

possibly have transpired last evening which would have culminated with him passing out in his own bed at Grebe? Liquor obviously played no small part in it.

He ran pell-mell along the Military Road toward the unwelcoming lights of Tilling. It was a mere half-mile jaunt, but to the Major it was an eternity. He was drawn inexorably toward those lights which seemed to alternately mock and beckon. The stupendous loveliness of Tilling lay before him, a festival of red roofs and picturesque streets, but Major Benjy was not one who had ever learned to appreciate the beauty of this town. Nor, if he had, would he likely have felt capable of doing so on this particular morning. Instead, his thoughts were entirely occupied by his wife.

If Elizabeth had stayed up to wait for him (not unlikely) she would hopefully have fallen asleep at some point and dragged herself to bed. Unfortunately, she would have awakened if he had stumbled in at a late hour and passed out on the bed. It would be virtually impossible for her to have slept through something like that. Elizabeth's penchant for being a light sleeper, and the Major's penchant for clumsiness when he had had a few too many, were the ingredients which spelled possible disaster.

If he was lucky, Elizabeth would be fast asleep upstairs and would not notice his predawn clandestine entry. He could arrange himself on the downstairs sofa and feign innocence. It would certainly take no fanciful stretch of disbelief for Elizabeth to believe he had spent the evening on the couch: hadn't he done the same more than once already?

As the Major reached the Landgate, he slowed and briefly considered the possibility of taking a train to London. It left at half past six. It was a slow train, but at least it was headed in the correct direction: away from Tilling. After a few more steps and some soul-searching (and pocket searching) he realised the futility of that course of action. Perhaps because he lacked enough funds to purchase passage, he recalled that he was, above all, a gentleman, and his self-respect would allow no other choice but to face the gorgon.

He presumed, rather than knew with certainty, that he had not actually done anything wrong — unless you counted the liquor — but if his time with Elizabeth had taught him anything (it had, in fact, taught him a great deal) it was that perceptions were often more important to Elizabeth than the facts. And the perception was very incriminating, indeed.

He shouldered his burden, took a deep breath, and let himself into the Cottage. The house was quite dark and still, the servants not yet astir. He debated removing his shoes so as to tread more quietly, but that would just further demonstrate to Elizabeth his lack of innocence: skulking about in his own home. He instead proceeded to the dim parlour and groped about for the the couch. He tossed onto the floor one or two of Pillson's revolting needlework pillows to make it look

as if he had been there the entire night, tossed his coat on the dim outline of a nearby chair, and settled himself in. He smiled to himself at a job well done and finally began to relax.

"Well, Major Mapp-Hint, what have you to say for yourself?"

For the second time this morning Benjy jumped to his feet as if propelled from a cannon. "Lizabeth! What are you doin' up at this hour?" he sputtered, the over-imbibing he had indulged in just a few hours ago still serving to blur his speech.

A wall sconce flickered to life to reveal Elizabeth, still in her evening clothes and with a deck of cards laid out on the table before her.

"I see we think alike, not dressing for breakfast. In fact," she continued, "neither one of us has changed since yesterday. Round about noon for you, I think." The jovial nature of her words was in sharp contrast to the acidic tone which assailed the Major's ears. She went on. "Though I must admit that my own neglect is due to concern about my dear, dear husband's health."

"Now, now, girlie. I can explain..."

"How dare you!" Elizabeth suddenly exploded, grabbing up a handful of cards and hurting them at the Major. "You — you ingrate! You horrible, despicable cretin! I work and work for our happiness. Not a thought to my own needs. And what do you do but flaunt your association with that woman and make a mockery of my efforts to hold on to some semblance of a marriage. And (dare I say it?) love. Yes: love! It must be love blinding me to your hundred defects and shortcomings.

"Well, you may consider my noble but futile efforts to have come to an end. Right here and now. When that woman finally leaves our house, I shall be returning to Grebe alone. I suggest you ask Mrs. Wyse if you can obtain a long lease on this Cottage, for you shan't be stepping foot in my house again."

"Girlie!" The Major began, but realised he didn't have the faintest idea what to say. Well, he could begin by apologising: he couldn't go wrong with that.

"I, I am 'fraid I have behaved most dishonourable to you, my wife, and I offer my mos' humble apologies."

"Too late!" Elizabeth shrieked. "By the way, you should know that I have brought your account with the Tilling Wine and Spirits shop up to date. You will find your account there is now closed."

The Major paled. The possibility of losing a wife was one thing, but to be cut off from his sole solace — at a time when he was obviously facing a crisis — was almost unendurable. This news helped sober him up considerably. "Now steady on, girl. What did you do?"

Elizabeth snorted. "You heard me the first time, Major. I shan't repeat myself. You will now be good enough to remove your personal toiletries from my bedroom. Withers has prepared one of the empty

servant's quarters for your use. And you may use the servant's bath.

"Use the servant's quarters? That's unheard of!"

"Yes," agreed Elizabeth. "I wish that it was as unheard of as marital infidelity. Sadly, it is not. Gather your things now, if you please, Major."

Benjy knew it was no use trying to reason with his wife when she was in this state, and he took himself away.

Some time later found the Major soaking in the servant's bath, sulking. He had not, since his flight from Grebe, allowed himself to ponder where he had actually been and what he had actually done. Unfortunately, there was not actually very much for him to review. He recalled accepting an invitation from Hattie to teach her the rudiments of golf. It was she who had later suggested a nice little restaurant in Brighton which her Lucy had recommended as extremely palatable.

They had dined and the Major had considered and rejected the idea of sending a telegram to Elizabeth telling her he would be late (the cost was prohibitive, and he couldn't decide how to inform his wife that he was out and about with a widow and quite unchaperoned). Instead, they had lingered over after-dinner drinks, swapping stories. Hattie seemed duly impressed at the Major's tales of action in India (which had fortunately been free from actual incident), while he had been intrigued by her tales of her late husband, the stockbroker. The whisky flowed rather freely, and he only remembered bits and pieces after that. He seemed to recall strolling about the town with her, and stopping here and there to peer into the shop windows. He distinctly recalled entering a particular shop with Hattie. She had been attempting to convince him to make a purchase, but he was demurring. To what end he could not recall.

He suddenly stopped applying his sponge, struck by a horrid thought. He did, in fact, abruptly recall events with a clarity he would have preferred not to have had bestowed upon him. He rose from his bath, heedless of the puddles he was creating on the floor, and proceeded to examine himself in the body-length mirror fastened to the back of the door. He scrutinised his shoulders, arms, and legs. There were no visible marks of any sort, other than those which could be sadly attributed to the natural process of aging.

He heaved a sigh of relief and turned to re-enter his bath. That was when he saw it. Very small, but quite distinct. The needle, under the careful direction of the artist's hand, had fashioned a small red, heart-shaped tattoo. It mercifully had no one's name on it, nor was it in a place in which anyone else but himself was likely to discover it. Yet, that real comfort was offset by the unmanly nature of it, and the fact that Mrs. Blanchard undoubtedly knew not only what the Major had that proprietor apply to his body, but also where it had been

applied. He was unsure of many things, but one thing was certain: he would no longer be able to face Mrs. Blanchard (referring to her by her Christian name now was hardly appropriate, considering the humiliating feelings which surrounded any thought of her). He must live the life of a hermit until Elizabeth had returned to Grebe and Mrs. Blanchard had returned to America. The idea of Mrs. Blanchard having possibly seen his backside filled him with acute embarrassment.

As he eased himself back into the tub, it suddenly occurred to him that the area around the tattoo was quite sore. He would have to be careful of it for some time. God, he could use a whisky and soda...

As for herself, Elizabeth was indignant and remained so for the remainder of the morning. Falling asleep in her chair by the fireplace left her with an aching back, a condition which only aggravated her already-sour disposition.

That the Major had stayed out all night and then attempted to "pull one over" on her by deliberately placing the couch in disarray filled her with dread. What if those other times he had supposedly fallen asleep on the couch were, in fact, episodes not dissimilar to this one? She had always taken them at face value, and it now appeared as if her trust might have been misplaced. She was truly at wit's end, and after a silent breakfast which the culprit had not the decency to avoid, and fleeing back to his room to catch up on his sleep, she set off on her errand. She had decided to confide her thoughts in someone whom she felt would understand and who she could count on as a compassionate supporter. Elizabeth came out of the Cottage, turned left and, walking the thirty yards to the front door of Mallards, rang the bell.

Lucia pedalled up the slope of West Street just in time to see Elizabeth admitted into Mallards. She wondered for an instant what that could mean, but then turned her attention back to her bicycle. She had long ago learned the difference between her brake and her bell, but the constant use of her brakes on the steep slopes of the town had rendered the former only marginally more useful than the latter. She would have to get someone at the bicycle shop to repair it. She left it outside, leaning against the garden room wall and hurried in.

"Georgie suspects," Lucia said, even before she had closed the garden room door after Elizabeth, "I don't know for certain that he has figured out the reason behind our new-found friendship, but I know he is thinking a great deal about it. And it is fortunate he is out right now doing his morning shopping, or I don't know how I would ever have explained your presence." She paused and observed Elizabeth clutching a handkerchief and looking very nearly devastated.

"Why, Elizabeth! Whatever is the matter, dear?"

Elizabeth poured her heart out to the startled Lucia,

who was so completely surprised at Elizabeth's confiding in her that she did not at first believe the tale. But the more Elizabeth spoke, the truer was Lucia's conviction that Elizabeth did, indeed, believe every word of it. Lucia instinctively laid a comforting hand upon hers.

"We certainly must proceed to debunk this scandal at once, whether it is true or not." Lucia announced.

"You don't believe me?" wailed the stricken woman.

"Of course I believe that you believe the worst. But it doesn't matter what I think, my dear. The most important question is: what will Tilling think?" Lucia could not possibly fathom anyone — not even Mrs. Blanchard — taking such an intense liking to the Major that she would engage herself in an affair. In fact, if pressed, Lucia would have to admit that she had no idea how Elizabeth herself could tolerate sharing a bed with her husband. She chose not to dwell on that indelicate matter.

"What will Tilling think?" repeated Elizabeth in a meek little voice.

Lucia saw at once that she needed to be firm. "My dear, you must rise above this mire of scandal. It is incumbent upon you to take not the merest notice of this slight. It is all well and good to snub someone when they have affronted you, but that would show her you felt the snub, which would never do."

"No," agreed Elizabeth, sniffing.

Lucia sat forward, resting her chin in the palm of her right hand, a gesture denoting Thought. She remained in that position for a long minute, until Elizabeth began wondering if perhaps Lucia had somehow managed to fall asleep with her eyes open. Lucia finally spoke.

"And what does the Major have to say about all this?"

"That man! I want never to see him again!"

"Yes, that may be so, but what is his side of the story?"

Elizabeth pouted. "I have no idea. Didn't ask."

"Well, perhaps that is for the best right now. But tell me: do you actually intend on returning to Grebe at the end of the month without him?"

"Of course. Backing down is not in my nature." That was true enough.

"It is worse than I had first thought," Lucia admitted, more to herself than her guest.

"What do you mean by that?" Elizabeth asked, a hard edge creeping into her voice.

"Only that I had met them in the High Street one morning before the costume ball, where we exchanged pleasantries... and they were being rather pleasant to each other."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" snapped Elizabeth, beginning to feel as if the entire world were against her.

"At the time, you and I were not on the best of

terms. I doubted that you would have believed me."

Elizabeth took a deep breath as if to refute that statement, but found she could not.

Lucia abruptly dismissed the issue with a reassuring smile and wave of her hand. "October is still more than a fortnight away. We shall see what we shall see about the Major and your attitude then."

Elizabeth shook her head violently. "I said I will not allow that cretin into my house, and I meant it. And if he thinks for one moment that I shall give him the respectability of a divorce in order that he can go chasing across the Atlantic after some foolish middle-aged delusion of his, he is very much mistaken.

"I should have murdered him, not married him. After all, a funeral can be as glamorous as a wedding. And the floral arrangements are often just as attractive."

Lucia could see that Elizabeth was working herself up into quite a fever pitch and again laid a hand on hers. "It would appear that pretending to accommodate Mrs. Blanchard has backfired, for as long as we take no action against her, everyone else will see fit to associate with her. But perhaps we should discuss something else for a while?" she offered.

Elizabeth brought herself back from the brink of the abyss and smiled, dabbing at a moist eye with her handkerchief. "Yes, that might be best. I hear from Diva that you rejected Mrs. Blanchard's painting. Tsk, tsk. What a letdown for her. Just as she was feeling such a part of our little town, too. What ever could have compelled you to act so completely unchristian, I wonder?" Elizabeth smiled sweetly, and Lucia was thankful that this blast of mephitic sulphur had not been aimed at her.

"It was a duty I felt necessary. The Wyses were fit to be tied, but I dare say they will recover. I am certain they lost no time in parading up and down the High Street yesterday afternoon issuing the remarkable news. It is, after all, the first blatant action either of us have taken against that woman. So far," Lucia added menacingly.

Both women laughed, with Elizabeth opening her mouth so wide Lucia could see Elizabeth's uvula. She looked away.

"You've been such a dear friend, Lucia. How could I hope to repay you?"

"Well," Lucia said, thinking quickly, "I would have liked some assistance in setting up the christening of my Roman Pavilion, but it would be rather awkward for you to help me when we need to present a united front. Or, rather, not present a united front. If you know what I mean."

"I do, indeed," Elizabeth said. "In fact, unless I were to assist in an official capacity, I don't see how on earth

"That's it!" cried Lucia. "How clever. Of course: I shall include the town council in the festivities. In fact, I think I shall expand my original concept of a tea party.

You are so clever, Elizabeth, to have suggested it. As my Mayoress, it is your official duty to assist me in my endeavours. Splendid."

"Anything I can do, dear Worship, just ask," Elizabeth cooed, straightening her dress and pocketing her handkerchief. "But I'm afraid I must be getting along now and do my morning marketing. Would never do to skip it after a night such as I've had. People might talk."

"They might, indeed," agreed Lucia, already mentally revising her plans for the tea party. She saw Elizabeth out and decided that she would, as they had just discussed, send out invitations to the town council. Perhaps the Lord Bishop might not be too busy to attend. Some sort of dedication ceremony commended itself to her. She knew she needed to move quickly, for September was rapidly drawing to a close, and the cool weather would soon be encroaching upon the evenings.

She could not, of course, hang Chinese lanterns. Mrs. Blanchard had taken care of that. Perhaps the garden might instead be festooned with large candelabras. The large, floor-standing ones. She had seen just the ones she wanted in the ironmonger's shop several months previous and wondered if they could be rented out.

And thinking ahead further, if she were to involve Elizabeth (the poor dear: anything to take her mind off her own personal tragedy) she could not involve Georgie. If he were intimately connected with the preparations, Lucia was fairly sure she herself or (more likely) Elizabeth would let slip some innuendo, or act inappropriately, and thus tip off Georgie to the true story. But she was not sure how to manage it. His trips to Mr. Frost's were beginning to wane. He gave the story of a new sketch he was doing of Mr. Frost's garden plot, but still had not offered to show it to her. Not to mention she had discovered his painting box in the closet under the stairs, which rather cinched it for her — or would have if she had not had previous ocular evidence of his helping Mr. Frost work on a motor car engine.

Perhaps if she simply neglected to prod him toward including himself in this latest stunt, he would take the opportunity to avoid it. She was clever enough to perceive that Georgie often felt dragged unwillingly into her schemes, and she hoped he might welcome this opportunity to experience a reprieve. She smiled, self-satisfied. This sounded like a plausible plan of action.

This latest meeting of the Conspirators was evidence of the strain beginning to show in their newly-formed friendship. With both of the Tilling ladies on the lookout for anything which they felt might be useful against Mrs. Blanchard, their nerves had begun to resemble a mediaeval arbalest which, with the avoidance of each new fiasco, the cranequin

was worked to wind the bow tighter. This conspiracy of silence was becoming a bit unnerving, and Lucia could foresee it leading to disaster if she was not careful.

Irene had expected to hear from the Tilling Art Committee long before now. Here it was Friday, and the exhibit was opening tomorrow. Two out of her three works: the Landgate at dusk and the cricket field players, she was certain would be accepted, but she had also fully expected her largest canvas, Boudicca in her chariot, to be rejected. She had only submitted it as a lark: the nude figure of a woman, whose primary attributes were obscured merely by flowing locks of blond hair was certainly not going to pass inspection with the committee. Yet, she had not received a formal notice of rejection, nor had her painting been returned to her. It was true that her broad, surrealistic style produced images which the more traditional residents of Tilling often found some difficulty in deciphering, but she hardly felt that this portrait would have been such an example.

In pursuit of the answer to this mystery, therefore, she bicycled out to Grebe that very afternoon. She was greeted by Miss Thalman, and was told that Mrs. Blanchard was unavailable for the remainder of the afternoon. Once being informed of the nature of her errand however, Miss Thalman bade her to enter and inspect the exhibit for herself.

Irene walked up and down the main hall without seeing any of her works, then continued her search in the parlour, where the remainder of the images were displayed. There, displayed on a corner easel, toward one corner, was Queen of Icen. Irene gave a shout of exasperation.

"What on earth is the matter with these people?" she cried out to no one in particular. Miss Thalman responded politely, "Pardon me?"

Irene grabbed her large painting and, turning it, replaced it on the easel. "The silly committee has got my work of art upside-down. How on earth anyone could tell what they were viewing is beyond me. There she is: Boudicca, masterfully bursting through the clouds as they spew forth their green and purple lightning, bathing the warrior queen in striking fanciful tones."

Miss Thalman took a step back from the sketch and her eyes bulged. "I... see what you mean, Miss Coles. Yes, it presents quite a different aspect when viewed from this angle." She cocked her head. "Quite powerful, actually. A very determined countenance. Quite lovely, I think"

Irene turned to her. "Do you honestly think so? I get so tired of the traditional here in Tilling: none of the locals except my darling Lucia — and sometimes even she is only humouring me — appreciates my work."

"I would like to tell you that, although I have no right to appraise your work, I appreciate your style of

painting, as well as your choice of subject matter, Miss Coles," Miss Thalman said, earnestly.

"Well, is that a fact?" asked Irene, smiling more to herself than Miss Thalman, as she produced her pipe and filled it from a sealskin pouch.

"Oh, my!" cried Miss Thalman suddenly. "If your magnificent painting was the wrong side up until just now, it means the man from the Hastings Chronicle took a photograph of it that way."

"What man?" Irene asked, and Miss Thalman explained. Irene felt another surge of exasperation, the antidote to which, Miss Thalman suggested, consisted of ringing up the newspaper and asking them to print the photograph upside down. Irene accepted the offer of the use of the telephone and discovered that the art editor had gone home for the weekend. As the newspaper was being printed tonight in anticipation of its regular distribution the following morning, Irene felt that diplomacy in this case was merely a waste of time, and was finally connected to the foreman of the press himself. With some difficulty, she made herself understood over the sounds of the press and convinced the man on the other end of the line that not only was she the artist whose painting was on page three of tomorrow's edition, but that if he wished to continue his employment, he would do his utmost to find some way of turning around that picture. After they had both exchanged words which would be unprintable on any page of the Hastings Chronicle, he finally agreed to make the change.

"Well that was fun! And such a close call, too. Thanks ever so much, Miss Thalman."

"Please call me Lucy, Miss Coles."

Irene laughed goodnaturedly. "And I'm Irene. I'm laughing because Lucy is the name of my parlourmaid! And the model for my Boudicca which you appear to admire so much."

"Really?" Lucy said, smiling. "Come into the kitchen, Irene. I'll make us some tea."