

The following morning found Lucia occupying herself with a leisurely bath and an unhurried toilet. The early afternoon ceremony of the opening of the art exhibit filled her with mild anticipation. It was not simply that Mrs. Blanchard's sketch was not to appear among the exhibit — that was pleasant, but not of first-rate importance. It was also not just that she anticipated the Hastings Chronicle notice about the exhibit. (While she was convinced only Irene would receive mention, nonetheless her own desire to evade the public eye would insure minute scrutiny for her own name in this morning's edition.)

No, the primary object which pleased her would be the dearth of attendees. No one in their right mind would slog out to Grebe on such a day as this. It had rained the night through, which meant that the low-lying road out to the exhibit would be a natural aversion to anyone with even the most vivid interest in the exhibition.

She had just begun breakfast (Georgie was late, as was his wont these past few Saturdays) when there came an insistent banging and rapping at the front door. Lucia hurried to the door herself and undid the chain. Standing there on the damp front stoop was Mrs. Bellwether, quite red in the face, and seemingly overwrought.

"Mrs. Bellwether! Do come in!" cried Lucia. Town Councillor Bellwether was a very large woman, but not quite expansive enough to completely block the morning chill wafting into the hall.

"Mayor Pillson," Mrs. Bellwether said in the sort of tone Lucia had heard Elizabeth Mapp-Flint reserve for impertinent tradesmen, "I hereby call an emergency session of the town council at nine-thirty this morning — in exactly thirty minutes — in order to determine what is to be done about this. To be convened at Grebe." She fairly slapped a folded newspaper into Lucia's hands, and strode off in a huff.

"Won't you stay for breakfast?" Lucia asked the retreating figure, who ignored her and, instead, marched resolutely past Mallard's Cottage, presumably toward the Town Hall.

"Who was that?" asked Georgie, descending the stairs wearing his new beige and white bathrobe and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Lucia assumed a nonchalant tone she didn't feel. "Mrs. Bellwether. One of my town councillors. Let us see what has upset the poor woman. Strung out to quite a pitch. Sometimes she reminds me of poor Elizabeth." As she was speaking, Lucia unfolded the newspaper to see it was the Hastings Chronicle, and an indefinable sense of foreboding nudged at her. She turned the page, and gasped. Printed in black and white, without the garish tones to mislead the eye and

— Lucia saw instantly — printed upside-down, was

Irene's painting of Boudicca. She had submitted it, after all. Lucia moaned, very faintly, and handed it to Georgie. He realised instantly what it was, having helped write up the catalogues, and was thus intimately familiar with each piece in the exhibit. He had a sudden inspiration and spun the paper around.

"Oh, dear!" was all he could get out. There was no mistaking what picture it was. He read the caption out loud, which included Mayor Lucia Pillson as the main organiser of the event, and mentioning Irene's previous exhibit at the Royal Academy.

"Caro," Georgie asked, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "What are we to do?"

Lucia stood, staring out the hall window into the warming sunshine. "What is done is done. Now we must see if we cannot somehow minimise the damage. Perhaps I can persuade Irene to remove the piece."

"But it's already in print... and in my beautiful catalogue which I worked so hard on!" Georgie argued.

She turned a thoughtful eye upon him. "Perhaps you have a point. The committee has already accepted the painting. To back down now would be a loss of prestige." She added quickly, "Not that I am particularly concerned with poor Mrs. Bellwether's opinion of me, of course."

Georgie snuck another fleeting but titillating glimpse at the nominally-covered figure. "You realise, of course, that everyone believes you approved of this picture being on display?"

"Of course," Lucia said, throwing her hands into the air. "So would I if I didn't know better." She sighed. "I shall have breakfast, and then visit Grebe to see for myself how vivid is the piece in its full splendour, and attend this "emergency council meeting." Will you be a comfort and accompany me, caro-mio?"

"Certainly," Georgie agreed, and hurried back up to his bedroom to get dressed. It was times like these when he felt it his duty to stand beside his wife, regardless of his impending attack of nerves as a result of the inevitable confrontation looming in the distance. Thirty minutes was certainly not enough time to dress, have breakfast, and travel to Grebe, which was just as well, as Georgie was certain he would not be capable of eating a morsel until this whole muddle was resolved. He did, however, have time for two hastily-inhaled cigarettes.

The trip to Grebe by Royce was performed in silence. Lucia spent her time looking out the window at the passing countryside and composing her thoughts, while Georgie tried to casually and unobtrusively adjust his toupee, which he was not convinced he had applied this morning with his usual expertise.

The entrance to Grebe itself was astonishingly difficult. This typically ill-used road was a veritable beehive of activity. Motorcars were jostling for room to turn around, others were parked along both sides of the

road, and numerous bicycles were propped against the hornbeam hedge. Georgie was preparing to hurry in, the excitement getting the better of him, but caught himself just in time to match Lucia's regal, reserved progress as she approached the front door. They entered.

"Beloved!" cried Irene upon spotting Lucia. She jumped up from the table behind which she had been assisting Miss Thalman in dispensing catalogues, and making change for those who lacked the proper three pence and three coppers admission price.

"Isn't it wonderful?" cried Irene. The talk of the town. I hoped it would be! A damned lot more controversial than that old piece I did which wound up at the Royal Academy. By the way, which one of you silly committee people had it displayed upside-down? Certainly not you, was it? No matter, I fixed it in time and called the paper. You just missed the Wyses. I told them about it, too. Seemed a bit put-out."

Lucia was fairly dragged along by Irene as a tugboat hauls a liner out to sea, her aggressive manoeuvring soon giving Lucia a perfectly clear view of the painting in question. There was no doubt. The bold brush strokes and vivid purples and greens gave a surrealistic atmosphere to the painting, but did not in the least obscure its subject matter.

As they stood among the crowd of giggling and murmuring gawkers, many of whom held copies of the Hastings Chronicle, an elderly woman next to Lucia swooned, apparently overcome by the risqué nature of the piece (or perhaps from the confining nature of the overcrowded room), but this nevertheless gave Lucia an opportunity to back away from the lurid painting.

"Georgie! Where's Georgie?" She found him just inside the front hall, apparently lacking the nerve to actually view the original painting in all its glory. She touched his hand and suggested he wait in the Royce.

"Mrs. Pillson!" cried Mrs. Blanchard, hurrying up to her. "One can hardly breathe in there. I'm so glad your exhibit is such a success. I knew the official opening wasn't due until later this afternoon, but what could I do? They began arriving early this morning, waving the newspaper about, and it has been like this ever since. I'm so glad this location is so popular. Perhaps you would consider holding it here again next year. If the Mapp-Flint's tenant would permit it, of course."

Lucia drew herself up to her full height. "A pity, isn't it, that titillation of the masses often invokes more interest than more erudite and proper artistic endeavours. A further pity you took it upon yourself to arrange the pieces for the committee to examine: perhaps you will be more careful in the future and allow those of us who know something of art to handle the exhibit from beginning to end. In doing so we may avoid fiascoes such as this, and I will not be called upon to rescue well-meaning souls like yourself from

your own honest mistakes." Mrs. Blanchard stood, open-mouthed.

"Your Worship!" a shrill voice called out from the other end of the room. Mrs. Bellwether stormed over to Lucia, two other Councillors in tow. She began in on Lucia immediately.

"What on earth possessed you and the two other members of your "art committee" to permit this shameless example of ribaldry to not only go on public exhibit, but to be used as a showcase for Tilling: for that is what any newspaper appearance of our beloved town serves as — an example of the morals we hold dear? Do you honestly expect our tourism trade not to be affected by this vulgar display?" Mrs. Bellwether had rolled up another copy of the Hastings Chronicle (she had apparently purchased several in order to appreciate the full effect of the travesty brought down around the ears of the town) and was slapping it against the palm of her hand.

Lucia was well acquainted with Mrs. Bellwether's antics. As the most lively member of the town council, it was significant that she had only managed to cajole two other (rather easily swayed) council members to attend this "emergency session". Lucia thus had no longer any fear of a mutiny by committee.

Lucia gave a silvery laugh, perhaps a tad too shrill to be genuine, and dug in her heels, "My dear Mrs. Bellwether. As you can see, the majority of the attendees here are locals. The ill-fame you seem to envision has thus far failed to materialise. And I for one find the painting refreshingly modern and bold in its rendition of one of the more vivid events in our glorious country's history. While I surely do not propose hanging it in the Town Hall, I feel — as do Mr. and Mrs. Wyse — that it has merit far beyond what you are willing to ascribe to it. Otherwise we would never have accepted it."

"I see," Mrs. Bellwether said with chilling finality. "So you plan on doing nothing to shield more delicate eyes from this freakish display of barbarism?"

"Certainly not," Lucia replied. "It was accepted by the art committee, and there it shall stay. Good day, Mrs. Bellwether. What a fine morning."

Unfortunately, that was not the end of it. The Wyses, made of less-resolute stuff than Lucia, and ones who preferred avoiding confrontation at all cost, once again went directly against Lucia's decision. Mrs. Bellwether was quite charming, thought the Wyses, when she showed up at Starling Cottage unannounced later that morning, and even more winsome when she explained the powers of the town council to close down the exhibit permanently based upon violations of ordinances on the books regarding any display of indecency. So intimate had the trio become, that the

Wyses found themselves relaying the true reason the picture had been accepted in the first place, a fact Lucia undoubtedly had omitted for clarity's sake.

This final desertion had an appalling effect on the social fabric of Tilling. Quaint Irene had a fit when the Wyses informed her that the sketch was to be withdrawn, and nearly tore it to shreds before Miss Thalman could stop her. Instead, Irene presented it to her, with the proviso to keep it packed away and out of her sight until Lucy reached the States.

Georgie was put out that the catalogue had to be completely redone, as it was now woefully inaccurate. For that, he blameworthy wished to blame the committee, but his natural kindness overrode such a petty complaint.

But it was Lucia for whom this whole affair had the most extreme effect. Lucia refused to speak to the Wyses, as well as deciding to intensify her boycott against Mrs. Blanchard, who was really the root of the problem. Since appearing in Tilling, Mrs. Blanchard had simply taken over. This was an intolerable situation for a person as dynamic and forceful as Lucia, and she, like Major Benjy, vowed to spend the remainder of Mrs. Blanchard's stay (amounting to just over a fortnight) cloistered at home. She would receive no one, she would hold no parties, she would accept no invitations to dinner or bridge. She had attempted, several times without success, to pull Mrs. Blanchard down. Nothing had worked, and now Lucia was prepared to play her final, guaranteed, ploy: to simply wait her out. This desperate, final scheme certainly involved a loss of prestige. There was not a single friend of hers who would miss the significance of the manoeuvre, but once the odious one had been purged from her kingdom, Lucia could once again take steps to regain her throne. But for now, there was Aristophanes and Mozart...

The other Tilling residents heard of the situation in due time, and their verdict was hardly different from the Wyses: Lucia had clearly been attempting to save face in an embarrassing situation, at the expense of Tilling's reputation. She had expected the tide of public opinion to back her latest tactic, but she had, this once, overestimated her influence. Her friends were once again becoming restive under her monarchy, and it was indeed a good thing Lucia had decided not to accept any bridge party or dinner invitations, for there were none delivered to Mallards House, addressed to Lucia. It was dear to the outside observer that it would take some horrific catastrophe or mutual calamity to draw together the shattered remnants of society and, as difficult as it was for all to admit, it was not clear that anything even Lucia might dream up would be enough.

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Elizabeth Mapp-Flint approached Doctor Dobbie's door on this warm day in September. An earache was the culprit, for it had been quite persistent in resisting every effort on her part to cure it. Elizabeth had tried old Grandmamma Mapp's remedy of some cotton soaked with warm onion juice and laudanum, but the concoction did nothing except bring tears to her eyes. So her malady prevented her from being out and about in the High Street this morning, where she would have preferred to be occupied in the time-honoured profession of mentally dissecting her friends' foibles and weaknesses and peering into their marketing baskets to see what they had purchased.

As she entered the waiting room, she was just in time to spot Diva being ushered into the surgery room. The intimate matters which Doctor Dobbie was often called upon to attend to among the middle-aged ladies of Tilling prompted Elizabeth to respect Diva's privacy. After all, they were such good friends (when on speaking terms) that she was certain she could later find out from Diva just what ailment was bothering her. She picked up a magazine and busied herself with the latest dress fashions. She was imagining how outlandish poor Diva would look in some of the more extravagant Paris outfits (not that Diva could have afforded them), but her mind was actively occupied elsewhere.

She couldn't help but dwell on Lucia's latest failed bid for sovereignty. A simple mistake on Mrs. Blanchard's had turned into a political scandal for Lucia. It was sad enough that Lucia demanded Irene's travesty of a painting remain on display, but it would have been infinitely more painful for Elizabeth if she had been there at the time, for she was certain that Lucia would have expected her Mayoress to back her up on this matter. Elizabeth could not imagine lending her support to such a caricature of art — especially one executed by Quaint Irene.

This entirely sorry state of affairs had finally broken the truce between she and Lucia. Lucia clearly expected Elizabeth to submerge her own principles in support of whatever Lucia's current campaign happened to be. The thought of truckling to Lucia so publicly and plainly was revolting to Elizabeth's sensibilities.

The arbalest, which had been wound tighter and tighter these past few weeks had been grabbed up by Elizabeth and aimed squarely at Lucia. Now all she awaited was the opportunity to loose the bolt when and where it would do the most damage.

To be sure, Lucia was completely unaware that the enemy camp was re-arming with designs upon her: Elizabeth had seen to that by posting a condolence note in which she offered to help in any way she could. Since she timed the letter to be delivered after the matter had been settled, it was a mere token appeasement.

But she would move carefully, for who was to say when Lucia would tire of her self-imposed

imprisonment and once more emerge into the High Street, unconscious of any loss of status? It had only been four days thus far, but someone with her vitality must be chaffing at being so cloistered.

Elizabeth was abruptly switched off this train of thought when the inner door once again opened and she heard the most curious exchange.

"Are you quite certain?" Diva asked in what Elizabeth interpreted to be a stricken voice.

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Plaistow. A month... perhaps less."

Elizabeth carefully peered around her magazine in time to see Diva straighten herself up as if shouldering a terrific burden and slowly leave the office. The interpretation of this brief exchange could admit of several possibilities and Elizabeth immediately took it upon herself to believe the most dire. In fact, she was so certain of it, she informed Doctor Dobbie that her earache was quite gone (in fact, it still hurt rather much) and she dashed out and up the hill toward the High Street. Elizabeth was noble enough to forego her own comfort where public interest was concerned, and while she (excepting the principle parties) still had sole possession of this bombshell.

She saw Irene setting up her easel across from the Stationer's and ran over to her breathlessly.

"Irene! You'll never guess! Well, that's not the right way to put it, but —"

"What is it, for heaven's sake?" Irene interrupted, taking a paintbrush out of her mouth.

"Diva has only a month to live. I heard it myself."

"Oh, rubbish! What sort of nonsense are you listening to, Mapp?"

Instead of having a pleasant argument with her over it, as Irene expected, Elizabeth spotted little Evie Bartlett emerging from the Stationer's and made a beeline for her, completely disregarding Irene.

"Evie! You won't believe it! Never in a million years!"

"Whatever is the matter?" Evie asked, casually turning her marketing basket away from Elizabeth's prying eyes. She was taking some personal articles to the seamstress for alterations, and felt it would be improper for anyone else to see such intimate apparel.

Elizabeth ignored this gesture, instead announcing her declaration with all the weight of a member of parliament. "Diva! Dead!"

Evie frowned, looked at Elizabeth in puzzlement, and pointed past her down the street. "But Diva's down the road, just entering her house. What are you talking about?"

"Not yet," Elizabeth hurriedly explained, sneaking a hurried glance at the ill-concealed contents of Evie's basket. "But Doctor Dobbie gave her a month at most"

"No!" cried Evie. "When? Where?"

"Just now. She came out to the waiting room and I managed to catch the end of the conversation."

Evie sadly shook her head. "How did she look?"

Elizabeth sighed wistfully. "I didn't get to see very much," and hastily added, "I didn't want to intrude upon her grief."

"Quite right," Evie agreed, almost managing to hide her own disappointment.

They both stood there for a few moments, trying to absorb this terrific news. There had never been a death among their intimate circle of friends in Tilling. Of course, Major Benjamin Flint's old golf partner Captain Puffin had drowned in his soup one Christmas, but that had been a sudden passing, and not the sort which could be made much of. Perhaps partly because no one had ever made much of Captain Puffin.

For the remainder of the day, any previous topics of discussion met the same fate as the Dodo bird, as the circle of those sworn to secrecy expanded in ripples ever outward from Elizabeth. Never had Tilling been host to such a celebrity. As the news travelled, the participants began singing Diva's praises. And even avant-garde Irene Coles, who once called Diva a foul-minded old widow, was finally convinced, and returned home to begin a new painting to commemorate the impending departure.

Major Benjy, upon his return from golfing that afternoon, heard about it from Evie, and removed his cap with a rather unsteady hand for a moment of sincere respect.

After a good night's wrestle with the facts (of which there were precious few), the morning was devoted to clustering in the High Street and sharing learned conjectures as to the exact nature of Diva's illness.

Irene tapped out her pipe on the sole of her shoe and busied herself with the task of refilling it while she addressed Evie, "Maybe the old girl has come down with cholera. All those nougat chocolates she devours, you know."

Evie looked at Irene incredulously, shaking her head. "I don't see the connection at all. Certainly not cholera, or Doctor Dobbie would've given her a day at most, not a month. Typhoid fever is more likely."

Georgie fidgeted in front of Worthington's plate glass and, having been asked by Evie to render an opinion (so that it could be dismissed and gotten out of the way early), addressed the Padre and his wife, "Per'aps some delicate area of digestion has gone awry?"

"Wud that it'd be such a simple thing," the Padre countered. "I am of the opinion it must be something less obvious — per'aps more slow actin'. Some sort of blood disorder 'tis more likely. We can only hope the end won't be too painful," he added enthusiastically.

There was a hoot from the Wyse's Royce as it crawled toward them, and Mr. Wyse rolled down the window. "Is it all too true about Mrs. Plaistow?" he

asked in a stricken voice.

"Aye," the Padre said. "T'wud appear so. A tragedy, and in one so young."

Mr. Wyse nodded sagely, wondering to himself if Mrs. Plaistow's parish birth records were somehow inaccurate. Mrs. Wyse clucked sorrowfully. "We must have a nice service for her when the time comes, Algernon," she uttered in a stage whisper.

"What do you think might be the cause of Diva's trouble?" Georgie asked Mr. Wyse, fearful lest he would be put on the spot again and his own unimaginative explanation found lacking.

"My sister, the Contessa di Faraglione," Mr. Wyse bowed in what his listeners assumed to be the vague direction of Italy, "once wrote me about a consumption which afflicted a neighbouring village. Almost a third of the residents had passed on before the spread of the tuberculosis had been checked. While I do not propose that the specific malady which had caused so much distress there is the self-same illness which I fear is soon to be bringing an end to so fine a lady here in our own town," he bowed toward Diva's home, "nevertheless it appears to me that they might be of the self-same genus or family."

The three standing outside the car had just barely managed to follow Mr. Wyse's eloquent but meandering epistle, and were thankfully rescued by Susan.

"What nonsense, Algernon!" she reprimanded. "A fever on the brain is what she undoubtedly is suffering from. Why, I was in the draper's just the other day. Diva came in and she stood about for a good five minutes, as she had completely forgotten what she had come in for. Now if that isn't proof, I don't know what is."

"Ah," cried Evie, "Here's the Major."

After suitable exchange of pleasantries, Irene prompted the Major for his learned opinion.

Benjy drew himself up to his full height. It was rare that anyone asked for his opinion, and rarer still that he had a plausible contribution to make. He took advantage of this by attempting to be as pompous as he could manage. "Undoubtedly malaria. A most virulent and deadly form," he announced, with the absolute conviction of a soldier who had been to India and managed to avoid any actual contact with the disease. "Called Ague in the Service. Mrs. Plaistow should lay in a stock of quinine."

"Good morning, everyone," Elizabeth announced as she stepped from the grocer's into the High Street. "Such a tragedy, don't you think, dear Evie? Diva is such a vivacious and spirited personality. I hate to think of her taken from us so suddenly." Elizabeth turned and prodded at the cucumbers displayed in the grocer's outdoor display.

"Yes, we were all just speaking of it," Evie squeaked.

Elizabeth turned back. "Mmm. I would suppose a service of some sort might be appropriate. I would offer to hold one at my home, but it is nearing the end of September and thus the end of Mrs. Blanchard's stay and the closing of the Art Exhibition. I will soon be fully occupied moving back to Grebe." Elizabeth sighed. "The cottage is quite adequate for one person, but not really for two," she said, pointedly ignoring the Major's presence. "I am so looking forward to getting back home."

The Major turned to look down the street and removed his cap. "Why, bless me if that isn't Mrs. Plaistow now," he said, relief at a change of subject evident in his voice.

Evie sighed. "So noble. Does her shopping just as if nothing was wrong. Doesn't want to let on."

Irene looked puzzled. "Why is she coming up from King Street?"

"Ach, perhaps she ha' been to the church to pray," the Padre suggested reverently.

"Yes," Evie agreed, "But don't forget that the mortuary is down in the cellar of the Norman Tower. It would be just like her to arrange everything with the undertaker beforehand. I'm sure she doesn't wish to be a burden."

Georgie was considering something sharp about people who Beautified others while they still lived and breathed, but his better nature won out and he held his tongue.

"Hullo," Diva said, trudging up to them. "Just been to the church —" the Padre nodded solemnly and suppressed a slightly superior smile, "— to see what sort of flowers and plantings are there. I want a little variety in my garden next spring, and I thought I'd pop over there for inspiration."

The Padre's face fell, but he recovered. "And did ye find 'inspiration' enough in yon churchyard, Mistress Plaistow?"

"Certainly I did. Lovely marigolds and love-in-a-mists you have blooming, Padre." Diva stopped and coughed slightly. As a group, they just managed to check a perfectly laudable urge to surge forward and attend to her. All, that is, but Major Benjy who had been put in mind of coal miners and black lung, and beat a hasty withdrawal, intending to gargle with carbolic once he returned home.

The conclave broke up soon after, for no one could dream of continuing a conversation in which the main subject popped in and out of shops at the most inopportune moments, suspending the most interesting gossip while the talker thought desperately of some nonsense to fill the silence. In fact, they all would rather not have ocular evidence of Diva's noble decision to go about her marketing in the face of this terrible tragedy and, in fact, vaguely resented her presence.

Georgie eventually gave up and returned home, Diva's predicament still weighing heavily on his mind.

He asked Lucia's opinion about the entire affair, and even mentioned Diva's boldface lie about researching flowers for next year's teashop. Although the gleam in her eye betrayed her fascination with the news, Lucia was clearly still put-out about her self-imposed exile, and chose to be sarcastic instead of pumping him for more information.

"Did you know, Georgie," she said with an ill-used air, "I was doing some research in the Town Hall not too long ago, and discovered that, as late as the 1820' s, if you were a suicide they buried you at a crossroads with a wooden stake through your heart?"

"No," confessed Georgie, slightly dubious as to what this had to do with Diva. Was Lucia alluding to some privileged information about Diva's condition which no one else as yet knew? He had his doubts.

"The wooden stake," continued Lucia, "was designed to keep your ghost pinned to the spot, while burial at the crossroads was designed to dilute the evil of the crime to the four corners of the earth."

His doubts confirmed and depressed Georgie, for he had been looking forward to a good tell-up. Finding himself denied that pleasure, he went to find his washing leather in order to polish his bibelots, an unerringly faithful tonic whenever he was feeling dismal.

Late that afternoon, the second post arrived at Mallards with a letter on Grebe stationery. It was an invitation to Mrs. Blanchard's the following week for her bon voyage party. Lucia read it twice to be certain of its contents and summoned Georgie.

"Do you think this is an insensitively-phrased celebration of Mrs. Blanchard's returning to America and completely ignoring Diva's tragedy, or a crassly-worded party for poor Diva? Bon voyage has so many possible interpretations, don't you think?"

Georgie decided not to be sarcastic about the only two choices Lucia had given him. "I think it would be terribly miserable if it were the second. After all, Hattie — Mrs. Blanchard ~ has displayed quite proper manners up to this point. I don't think it very likely the party is for Diva. Perhaps she doesn't even know about Diva's condition."

Lucia fairly snatched the invitation from Georgie's hand and set her mouth. "Quite right, Georgie, now that I think about it. Mrs. Blanchard would never have had such compassion for her fellow man. It would never occur to her to organise a celebration of Diva's life, especially as she is leaving the end of the month."

Georgie did not ask which of the two women Lucia was talking about when said "leaving at the end of the month" and instead backed out of the room and fled upstairs. He had never known Lucia to truly despise anyone but Elizabeth, yet Mrs. Blanchard was appearing more and more to be a solid contender to share that dubious honour.

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Despite her demeanour being as cool as the cucumbers she had been inspecting in the High Street while she discussed Diva's predicament, it infuriated Elizabeth not to know what was wrong with her best friend and most severe critic. She could not, of course, come right out and enquire, ("Diva, darling, just what horrible disease are you suffering from? And tell me: just how disfiguring will it become by the end?"). And she knew better than to ask Doctor Dobbie who would simply refuse to answer.

As time wore on, Elizabeth's earache subsided, but her frustration grew. She thought it was terribly mean of Diva to show not the slightest symptom (the cough was a singular event and thus dismissed as an aberration), which would have enabled them to speculate intelligently upon the cause of her impending demise.

For herself, Elizabeth spent an inordinate amount of time in the High Street, bumping into friends who appeared to have developed the same fascination with shop front displays and scenic views from the Belvedere platform. Whenever Diva would appear for her morning marketing, naturally no one would dream of being obvious about examining her for the most minute signs of debilitation. Instead, they wore fixed smiles and greeted her warmly as they each went about popping into shops they had just vacated, or examining the vegetable stand as if each piece of fruit were a golden apple of the Hesperides. Whispered conversations followed in Diva's wake, but they were subtle enough that she was oblivious of them.

These conversations, naturally, did not merely revolve around Diva's impending sainthood. The morning that Evie visited the post office three times in order to purchase three stamps (once each visit), she ran into Elizabeth. Elizabeth had evinced a rather obsessive interest in sketching the front of Wasters, as she had completed this particular sketch and begun it all over again no less than four times.

"Elizabeth," Evie said, "I wonder who will be getting Diva's good tea set."

"Well, who does she have as the beneficiary of her will?" Elizabeth asked between dabs at the paper.

"I have no idea who her solicitor is," Evie admitted.

"So, find that out and you'll have your answer," Elizabeth replied, a bit more sharply than Evie thought was absolutely necessary.

"I was only wondering out loud, Elizabeth."

"Suit yourself," Elizabeth said, and reapplied her brush to the pastel blue of the sky.

"Well!" Evie huffed, and strode off.

Elizabeth smiled to herself. She was glad her brusque manner expelled the Mouse, as she was determined to have the pavement outside of Wasters all

to herself. The chance of being distracted and missing Diva's morning entrance was thereby considerably lessened.

"Hullo, Elizabeth,"

"Diva dear!" Elizabeth exclaimed, putting down her brush and suppressing a natural impulse to chastise Diva for being late to morning marketing and thus forcing Elizabeth to sketch so much that her hand ached. "How are you?"

Diva set her teeth on edge. "Just fine, Elizabeth. I do wish people would stop asking me." And with that, Diva spun on her heels and abruptly walked across to Twemlow's and entered that grocer's establishment.

Elizabeth set her mouth into a thin line. Well, that did not go as she had planned. Hardly a conversation at all with her best friend. But perhaps because of Tilling's constant verbal concern for Diva's health. Diva was tiring of all this attention, and had decided to subsist on banal conversations with the local tradesmen. For herself, Elizabeth would make certain that her own last words would not be, "Any artichokes, Mr. Twemlow?" Actually, as she considered it for the hundredth time, it once more struck Elizabeth as rather mean that Diva had not seen fit to confide in her. After all, Elizabeth was convinced that she could be just as sympathetic as the next person — and being the receptacle of Diva's secret would have elevated herself above everyone else who only knew of the pronouncement, not the diagnosis.

Actually, it was really unfortunate that this was happening to Diva, she who possessed one of the best analytical minds in Tilling. It would have been very helpful to have enlisted the aid of that insightful brain in determining the basis for this mystery. For example, if such a tragedy had befallen the Major...

Elizabeth was momentarily switched off this pleasant train of thought by Diva's re-emergence into the High Street. Perhaps the contents of her basket might offer a clue as to her ailment, but Diva moved too fast for Elizabeth to even consider tripping her, and she disappeared into the greengrocer's up the street.

Elizabeth returned to her reflections. Now, if it was herself who had been in such a terrible predicament, she would be noble and selfless. When she passed on. Benjy would receive Grebe and set up a shrine devoted to her.

Elizabeth suppressed a grimace. No, what would be much more likely is that the Major would invite that American to live with him and eventually marry him. Well, Elizabeth was not gone yet. Was it possible, she idly wondered, to exclude your husband from your estate? Elizabeth looked up to see Lucia and Georgie approaching, marketing baskets in hand. "Good morning, dear Worship. Mr. Georgie. Any news?"

Georgie piped up, "Well, we were discussing who might be getting Diva's wardrobe once... well, you know."

"Oh, dear. Such material concerns," Elizabeth said loftily, perturbed that everyone seemed to be a step ahead of her in this whole affair. She thought quickly. "Naturally, being her best friend, I suppose that I should --"

"Yes, exactly what we thought," agreed Georgie. "Both of you are so close in size."

Elizabeth sucked in her breath between clenched teeth. "Certainly not as close as all that. Most of her clothes would have to be taken in, surely. Quite a bit, in fact."

"Oh, why, of course," Georgie agreed, turning a brilliant crimson and following Lucia on to the shops.

Elizabeth tore her fourth sketch to pieces. It had been a sour morning so far, and there were no signs of it improving. She assembled her painting implements, folded her stool, and trudged slowly back home.

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The Padre had wrestled with himself for a long, agonising week. One of his parishioners was in distress, and it was clearly his duty to help alleviate that distress in whatever small way he might. To succour and to comfort was what Kenneth Bartlett had long ago been taught his role was as parish priest to the town, a position he took quite seriously. The spiritual well-being of Tilling was his responsibility (at least for those residents who did not attend the Roman Catholic church down the street). Thus it was clear to him where his task lay. Unfortunately, what was also clear to him was that poor Diva had elected (so far) not to confide in him her terrible news. While the sanctity of any dialogue between a clergyman and one of his parishioners was absolute, he briefly wondered if he was permitted to base a spiritual visit on news he had received during the morning marketing?

Evie felt no such quandary when the Padre consulted his spiritual superior.

"If you'd like, say that Doctor Dobbie told you, and asked you to look in on her. She hasn't been to see him since that day, you know,"

"T'wud be a lie, it would. Besides, I heard it from you, wee wifie, not from the Doctor. Ach, the only way to do this properly is to come clean to her 'an explain my position."

"Whatever you think best," Evie said disdainfully. She saw no problem with altering the window dressing when the main facts were so fascinating, but her husband unfortunately possessed scruples.

The Padre set off on his delicate mission after Sunday lunch. Evie had bribed him with dressed crab, but it did not induce him to request her presence as a spiritual aide. He felt quite capable of shouldering whatever burden Diva felt up to unloading upon him. In fact, he rather looked forward to it.

"Gud day, Mistress Plaistow."

Diva looked up from her open window. She had been mending a pair of gloves and welcomed an interruption. "Hullo, Padre. Time for a chat?"

"Aye! Just the thing I was hopin' for."

The Padre ascended the stairs and was ushered into Diva's sitting room. He stood rubbing the nap of his hat until Diva asked him to sit.

"Chat away! I've hardly heard any news for a week now," Diva began, (That's because it's all about you/ the Padre thought to himself), "so you must fill me in. Is Mrs. Blanchard really going home the end of the month? And did the Major actually spend the night at Grebe, with her in residence?"

"What? I hadn'ta heard that!" the Padre exclaimed, momentarily allowing his fascination with gossip get the better of him. "Where'd you hear such a fanciful tale, begorra?"

"My Janet. She heard it from Elizabeth's Withers. Elizabeth was furious. Stayed up all night, and caught him creeping in at daybreak He sleeps in one of the servant's rooms now, until Elizabeth returns to Grebe." Diva leaned forward. "And I heard that the Major has been inquiring of Mrs. Wyse if the Cottage is available for a long let."

The Padre ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh, my. I see I have been neglectin' my duties as the moral guardian of Tilling. Oh, dear."

"Now, now, Padre. You've nothing to admonish yourself over. These things happen to the best of people. Although, "she said, pausing in her sewing, "I'd be hard-pressed to choose the Major for a dalliance. Oh! Listen to me! Speaking like this in front of a man of the cloth. "So tell me, what news, Padre?"

The Padre took a deep breath. This was more difficult than he had imagined, and in his agitated state he dropped all traces of regional dialects, and assumed his native Birmingham. "I have been privy to a delicate issue concerning yourself, Mrs. Plaistow. Now, while I don't wish to pry, I do want to let you know that, when your time comes, I am here for you."

Diva looked at him, quite perplexed. "What on earth are you talking about?"

The Padre continued, "the issue which you discussed with your physician the other week. I — I don't wish to betray your confidence, but I did want you to know that I am available for whatever ministrations you may request."

Diva stared at him. "Such as?"

"Well, Penance if you feel it is required. Extreme unction, naturally. And —"

"It sounds like you think I'm dying!" Diva exclaimed, dropping her sewing onto the window seat beside her.

"Now, Mrs. Plaistow, you have a right to be upset with me. I wasn't even certain if I should visit you in your distress or not - these issues are such an intimate matter - but there is little use for you to feign

ignorance. I shall certainly tell no one else of your predicament, and naturally this conversation is between you, myself, and the Almighty --"

Diva stood. "But I'm not dying, Padre! Honestly! Whatever gave you that ludicrous idea?"

Diva's straightforwardness and absolute sincerity gave the Padre pause. It was beginning to look as if Elizabeth might have made a mistake.

"Er, at Doctor Dobbie's. He gave you a month to live."

Diva laughed and collapsed back into the window seat. "A month to live? Certainly not! I have a skin rash on my elbow the Doctor says will take a month to clear up if I keep applying ointment. This is the silliest thing I've ever heard."

Dawn broke over Diva's countenance. "That explains it! Everyone's been acting very strange this past week. I didn't know what to make of it. Oh, how ridiculous!" She paused further, then began laughing again. "Don't tell me: it was Elizabeth! I saw her in the waiting room that day. Poor Elizabeth, always getting hold of the wrong end of the stick' Padre, you must promise to inform anyone who asks that I'm not dying."

The Padre, embarrassed and flustered, instantly agreed. He escaped into the High Street bursting with the news, and would have rung the church bells if he felt that would have eased his embarrassment.

This intelligence spread faster than Diva's rumoured demise had done, but with the opposite effect. Whereas the news of Diva's original prognosis had spread like a wildfire after a particularly dry summer, the announcement that Diva was going to remain among the living doused that fervour like a wind changing course and blowing back upon the fire and thus extinguishing it. To the perceptive inhabitant (and all the members of Tilling Society were, of necessity, perceptive) a kind of malaise was noted spreading through the town. When all was said and done, the depressing truth had to be faced: the town found itself at the tail end of the most exciting event which had never happened.

Some might say that having Diva almost die was practically as exciting as if she had actually done so, but Elizabeth was not of that school. Diva had tricked them out of a spectacle which they had all (in varying degrees) been looking forward to with morbid fascination, and resentment over this began burning bright. It was not that anyone wished that Diva would actually have passed away, per se, but once promised such a unique experience, only to see it come to such an abrupt and ignoble end... Well, everyone naturally felt that he had been cheated.

But it was not toward Diva that these little bubbles of resentment were directed. After all, Diva herself had done nothing at all. Instead, it was Elizabeth toward whom this resentment was directed — and rightly so. This manifested itself in distinctly "cutting" her during

morning marketing, and declining en masse all invitations for her next tea party.

For her part, Elizabeth had faced such difficulties before, and was determined simply to wait out this particular fiasco. Surely something else would come along and take everyone's mind off her (really quite honest) mistake. She did her morning marketing, just as usual, determined to act normally, even if everyone else had suddenly developed some common malady (more disease!) which made her invisible to their eye. She paused at the greengrocer's and bent over to examine the lettuce. As she did so, her ear began to ache.