

This further disaster did nothing to heal the social fabric of Tilling. It, instead, had the opposite effect: that of rending the doth even further.

Society was unravelling at a monstrous pace. The Queens of Tilling had unwittingly found themselves in dire circumstances, never before having had to face such a masterfully understated, and yet blunt, foe as Mrs. Blanchard. Having the long-time pillars of Society both ostracised at the same time was an event unheard of in all of Tilling history. Then again, so many previously-inconceivable events had occurred this summer, that if there were a total eclipse of the sun, the residents, in all likelihood, would simply comment on the phenomenon, then resume their morning marketing.

Yet, there were slight signs that Tilling was becoming restive under Mrs. Blanchard. There were quiet rumblings to the effect that Elizabeth's rather honest mistake, and Lucia's typical grab for control were not quite the devastating affairs which they had been whipped up into becoming. Rather like a man who has dined for a fortnight upon sumptuous and exotic meals, the undertone of the commentaries seemed to be that the town was nearly ready to return to more familiar themes and recipes.

Naturally, "nearly ready" was the same as "almost finishing" a round of golf — an event to be avoided at all costs. So anyone anticipating a truly reconciliatory attitude at Mrs. Blanchard's bon voyage party that evening would, in all likelihood, be disappointed.

The callers had each arrived at or near a quarter to eight bearing a grudge apiece (and in the case of some of the more socially active ladies, more than one).

The evening had begun rather oddly for a dinner. Mrs. Blanchard's Lucy had greeted each visitor dressed in a simple black gown with some sort of tube-like hat made of crepe-paper, sporting a large foil-covered buckle in the front, doubtlessly made of pasteboard and covered in silver glitter. When Lucia and Georgie arrived (last, naturally), Lucia instantly guessed what the costume was.

"A pilgrim, Miss Thalman, isn't that correct?"

"Quite right, Mrs. Pillson," smiled Lucy. She stepped forward and whispered in an aside, "You would be surprised what some others thought I was portraying." She giggled, and without further explanation, led the way to the parlour, where the rest of the guests were assembled.

Mrs. Blanchard was dressed in the same pretentious brown Indian garb she had worn during her costume party, and in a loud voice bade everyone to enjoy the art exhibit. Lucia did not care for her hostess' tone, but took no notice of it. And, in fact, was so intent on doing so, that she took no notice of Mrs. Blanchard altogether when exchanging greetings with

the other guests.

As it was the end of September, Lucia knew that this would be the final opportunity to view the art exhibit, and survey what had been sold (or, more accurately, what had not been sold). Lucia watched her friends all wearily file by the sketches as if taking part in some macabre funeral procession (which could not be accounted for by Diva's presence). Instead of the usual prideful vanity or demure preening which typified this annual survey of Tilling's best and brightest local daubs, this was a solemn occasion. Lucia suggested that perhaps this feeling was being reinforced by the dark panelling of the hall and Elizabeth's peculiar taste for dark accents.

"Aye," the Padre agreed, "But I canna recall the rooms bein' quite so dark as when you were here, Mistress Pillson."

Mrs. Blanchard smiled. "Undoubtedly a house takes on the personality of its owner," she said, a comment which elicited an eruption of squeaks from little Evie and a sweet smile from Elizabeth, who replied, "Perhaps a bit less conserving of electricity might improve our enjoyment." She strode over to the switch and the room was instantly flooded with illumination.

But even with the electric light (which Lucia had put in during her tenure as previous owner) the exhibit certainly did not elicit the excited squeals and furious jostling for position as of old.

Lucia looked about at all the hard work her friends (and Elizabeth) had spent on this exhibit. Really, it was quite obvious that what was hanging here was some of the best sketches which Tilling had ever offered, and Lucia felt it was time to rescue the event.

"That sketch of the ships down at the harbour is quite good," Lucia said, knowing full well who had painted it.

"That would be Mrs. Mapp-Flint's work," Mr. Wyse said, stepping forward to read the signature.

"Not sold yet?" Lucia cooed. "I must have it."

Mrs. Wyse, taking the cue, strode directly over to a sketch which seemed to be of a nearly-black rainbow against a pitch-dark sky. "This one, the Landgate at dusk, is superb." Susan peered at the tag. "Quaint Irene! I see that your technique has improved."

Irene just looked at her, "Like you'd have noticed even if it did. That painting's two years old, Mrs. Wyse."

"I see. Well, perhaps I should take the opportunity to study more of your recent works to evaluate and contrast them with this."

"You could have, but some of my better pieces didn't make the cut," Irene replied, heavy with meaning.

Mrs. Wyse exchanged a guilty glance with her husband. "Perhaps it is for the best. Regardless, Algernon, I do wish to purchase Miss Cole's painting."

And so it went, the participants each purchasing the remaining unsold sketches (Georgie's exquisite sunflower sketch ironically fell to Elizabeth) just as they did each year. However, by the end of the sale, the circle of friends found their pockets lightened by a considerably larger sum than they were accustomed to paying, as there had been so many pictures remaining. Despite the signboard outside advertising the exhibit which Mrs. Blanchard had paid for herself, she admitted of few visitors wishing to trudge all the way out here after that first day's frenzied activity. Diva, still peeved about (among other things) the exhibit not being allowed at Wasters, where it could have been in the midst of the busiest street in Tilling, only harumphed at this news and said nothing.

Elizabeth herself was having a difficult time remaining cheerful. It was clear that the idea of the paintings at Grebe had not been a success. Had it been financially viable (which it clearly was not) the mere memory of Irene's disaster would play against any suggestion of the exhibit returning here. Even if she should suggest pasting the High Street with advertising, she doubted whether the members of the art committee would wish risking another fleecing such as they had just endured. She counted the days before Mrs. Blanchard would be on a steamer headed for the Americas and managed a feeble smile.

Lucia, meanwhile, was quite fulfilled. The cost of purchasing six paintings was no burden for her, and she recalled with a smile the immense satisfaction it had given her to lead the committee in their rejection of Mrs. Blanchard's painting. She suddenly had a momentary qualm, wondering if Mrs. Blanchard had hung it somewhere near enough to the rest of the exhibit that innocent visitors would have mistakenly believed it had merit. Fortunately, Mrs. Blanchard had not Elizabeth's audacity, and it became dear that such an exposure was unnecessary, as Lucia walked about the parlours and halls just to be sure.

"Finally!" Mrs. Blanchard exclaimed, once the auctioning had ended and the accounts settled, "Now we can eat." Lucia frowned and glanced at Georgie. So far Mrs. Blanchard had not changed one iota. Not that Lucia had really expected her to, but she did hope that two months in Tilling's rarefied air of culture and breeding might have served to make some slight impression. Alas, such was obviously not the case.

Mrs. Blanchard strode to the head of the table and tapped her water glass with a spoon. Everyone fell silent. "I wished, as this is my last party before I leave your beloved Tilling, to make it a memorable one. To this end, I decided to offer you a bit of American custom. It is two months early, but I thought I'd give a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, of the kind I always had while growing up. Now, without further ado, as I'm starving, let's eat!"

As the Major prepared to seat himself near the end

of the table across from Lucia, he realised that would put him right next to their hostess, a situation which would be unbearable. He looked about furtively and chose a seat further down the other end. He sank into the familiar chair and drew a long breath. Looking up, he realised he was sitting directly across from Elizabeth. He was instantly and completely crestfallen as he surveyed the decanter of wine perched on the table between the two of them. Elizabeth saw his eyes descend upon the liquor and smiled a brittle smile. The Major sank deeper into his chair, the anticipation with which he had looked forward to enjoying Mrs. Blanchard's stock evaporating like the alcohol from a bottle left open too long.

The dinner was certainly lavish, and the guests could not but help contrast this meal with the ones Elizabeth typically served at this very table. There were oysters on the half shell, baked black bass with hollandaise sauce, cranberries, turkey, chicken salad with mayonnaise, and enough desserts on the sideboard to sate even Diva's penchant for sweets.

But if the food itself was outstanding, the conversation was almost nonexistent. A casual observer might have been tempted to suggest that, because the meal was so exquisite, the diners were reserving their mouths wholly for the job of mastication. But there were no casual observers present, and the reasons for the infrequency and formality of the exchanges (amounting to the equivalent of "please pass the salt") were manifold.

For example, neither Elizabeth nor Lucia was speaking to Mrs. Blanchard. To be sure, their respective husbands were quite effusive in making up for their silences (the Major feeling rather safe with Mrs. Blanchard while under public scrutiny). But the fact remained that Mrs. Pillson and Mrs. Mapp-Flint undoubtedly continued their silence over concern that, should they begin speaking, they would say far too much of what was on their minds and thus ruin a perfectly good meal.

For their part, the Wysees could not see their way to speak to Lucia, as they were still quite miffed over the predicament she had left them in with regard to rejecting Mrs. Blanchard's portrait, and the acceptance of Irene's. While it was true that Lucia herself had faced down Mrs. Blanchard, and Lucia's bid to keep Irene's picture on display had failed, the Wysees still felt embarrassed at having urged Hattie to submit a sketch to begin with, and to have been implicated in any way with Mrs. Blanchard's honest — though tragic — mistake in positioning Irene's painting upside down.

The Bartletts were speaking, but not to each other: poor Evie had been found to have misinformed her husband, who then went on an extremely embarrassing and misguided mission, based upon her error. He was angry at having been misled. She was annoyed at the cost of the dressed crab which had gotten her nowhere.

Irene was cross with everyone for having so successfully misled her after her own gut instinct so unerringly told her that Diva was not in the least bit of danger. The canvas she had begun was now wasted, as the tragic inspiration which had fed her artistic talent was sitting across the table from her, filling herself with slices of turkey. And she was doubly vexed at the Wyse for having no backbone.

And, finally, everyone was indignant at Diva for leaving their wildest expectations unfulfilled — an attitude which was fine with Diva, who had decided not to speak to anyone until they had apologised to her for assuming the worst, instead of coming right out and asking if anything was the matter.

With all this ill-will ebbing and flowing about the dining room, it was little wonder that dinner was finished in record time, and the ladies left the men to their port long before nine o'clock.

The drawing room had been set up for three tables of bridge, and when she saw them Diva smiled for the first time that evening. It had not occurred to her (but it was obvious once the evidence had been presented) that this was to be the very first time the whole of Tilling Society would be able to sit at the same session of bridge. There were usually ten of them, which always meant that two people must, of necessity, be unwelcome. This had often meant quaint Irene and herself, as the rest of their friends were married couples, and expecting one spouse to arrive without the other (especially if they were speaking to one another) was still considered fairly unusual. But now with Mrs. Blanchard and her secretary Lucy, there were twelve. Three tables: just right.

"We must cut the cards for bridge," Mrs. Blanchard announced. "Let us see, there is Mrs. Pillson, Mrs. Mapp-Flint, Diva, Evie, Irene, Susan, Lucy, and myself. That makes eight, and the boys can look out after themselves."

Although quite a risque suggestion, those present abruptly shared mischievous smiles and silently filled two tables. For as many years as the assembled players had been duelling over cards, it had never occurred to any of them to do anything but wait while the men polished off their spirits. If this had been a party at Lucia's, she probably would have kept them at bay with a piano recital or lecture on Shakespeare. Thankfully, though, Hattie had decided against the obvious counterpart of a gramophone, and had instead offered this deliriously daring alternative.

"Excuse me," Hattie said, rising. "Mrs. Mapp-Flint, dear, please shuffle the cards. I won't be a moment."

Diva thought that a very odd activity for a hostess, and glanced at Elizabeth, who seemed completely oblivious. She watched Elizabeth shuffle the cards for a moment or two, then could stand it no longer. "Oh! I'll need my purse for when we settle accounts at the end.

I'll be right back," and followed in her hostess' footsteps. Major Benjy had just begun one of his favourite tales of India, after having just finished a glass of one of his favourite whiskies, when Mrs. Blanchard appeared in the dining room doorway.

"Major Mapp-Flint," she said quietly, "May I impose upon you for a moment?"

Major Benjy looked about him as if he were a rabbit caught outside his warren, and the fox was sitting at the opening to the rabbit hole. Clearly, there was nowhere to run, especially with the other menfolk of Tilling standing about, drinking it all in (both figuratively and literally).

"Er, certainly, Mrs. Blanchard. If it won't take too long. We mustn't keep the good lil' fairies waiting."

Georgie piped in with, "No, certainly not." Sensing something was not quite right, and receiving the vague impression that the Major wished to be rescued, he added, "Don't be too long, Major. You know how much Elizabeth enjoys her cards."

Georgie fretted for a few moments, twisting his rings around on his fingers, and looked about the room. The Padre and Mr. Wyse were deeply engrossed in a discussion of the meaning of the Padre's (rather vague) sermon last week, which enabled Georgie to slip out of the room unnoticed.

Hattie patted the Major's hand. "Just for a moment, Major," she said, leading him out to the front hall. She looked uncomfortable, but pushed gamely forward.

"I think I would like to say to you, Major, that there was an evening which we spent in Brighton —"

"Mrs. Blanchard!" Major Benjy sputtered and looked wildly about. "Not here!"

"No, no, Major. I just wanted to assure you that I had a lovely time," (the Major began sweating profusely), "and that nothing out of the ordinary occurred. In fact," she smiled sheepishly, "I can't say as I recall all that went on, especially toward the end of the evening."

There was a soft thump from the cloakroom side of the hallway wall, as if someone had been momentarily stunned by this revelation and had hit her head. The Major was too nervous to notice and instead made a feeble attempt at joviality. "Yes, well, Mrs. Blanchard. I, too, had a pleasant evening. I must say that waking up in my own bed here at Grebe was quite a shock."

There was another muffled thump, this time from the wall adjoining the short passage leading to the dining room.

"Does this mean you don't recall going into that tattoo shop with me in Brighton...?" the Major asked, thinking aloud.

"Which shop?" Mrs. Blanchard asked, recoiling slightly, her exclamation all but obliterating the pair of muffled thumps which resounded almost, but not quite simultaneously, against the opposite walls.

"Never mind, Mrs. Blanchard. Never mind." The Major let out a breath of relief. His shoulders relaxed for the first time in more than a fortnight, until he realised he had just let the cat out of the bag. Mrs. Blanchard may not have been an Albert Einstein, but surely she was capable of putting all the pieces together. He groaned and buried his head in his hands.

Four of the remaining women, which included Elizabeth, had cut for partners and were finished with the deal when the menfolk returned from their alcoholic respite. Elizabeth was perplexed and glanced at her watch, for the Major's habit had long ago convinced her that, when alcohol was freely offered, he felt a moral obligation to do his best to appear a gracious guest. He could certainly not have had enough time to perform this time-honoured feat with anything approaching his usual consumption, and she looked in vain for him. He was certainly not among the gentlemen who entered the room with Diva (why, she wondered parenthetically, were Mr. Georgie and Diva so red in the face?). There were now only two people missing from the parlour, which put her in mind of the quote: "Will you walk into my parlour?", said the Spider to the Fly.

Indeed, her fury was growing moment by moment, her anger over Mrs. Blanchard's mismanagement of the art exhibit now paling into insignificance as a far more immediate irritant took its place. If Mrs. Blanchard had been a fly to Elizabeth's spider, Elizabeth would have certainly have long ago disposed of the carcass.

"My bid?" Elizabeth asked Evie, in a tone which should have instantly frozen anyone's good nature.

"Yes," replied Evie, looking about the room and noticing the same telltale absence of two principals.

"Two hearts, then," Elizabeth replied. She looked up to see the Major finally entering the room, followed by Mrs. Blanchard. He walked unsteadily over to his wife.

"Liz, old girl. I think I shall go home. Not up to bridge tonight. Feel deucedly ill." The Major rubbed his stomach, but all that Elizabeth was capable of thinking was how acutely embarrassed she was at the Major having wrecked this unique opportunity for everyone to get to play cards, all for a dalliance with Mrs. Blanchard in the cupboard. The obvious inference that all had not gone well mattered very little. Her fury, which smouldered dangerously close to the surface, overrode her usual strictly observed rule about not engaging in public quarrels with the Major (her friends were such gossips!). Therefore, without turning from her hand, she told him, "Then I suppose you had best go home."

Diva was sitting across from Elizabeth and looked horrified. "Elizabeth," she whispered, "he really doesn't look very well."

Elizabeth suppressed a cutting remark about how healthy Diva appeared for someone who only a few days ago had been on death's door, but decided to postpone that quarrel — it would be rather taxing, just at this moment, to engage in two arguments simultaneously.

"Oh, very well. Take a taxi, Benjy. My purse is in the cloak room." She glanced up long enough to see the Major nod and amble off toward the promised funds. Elizabeth thought to herself that the Major looked more mortified than ill. She somehow felt vaguely responsible for Benjy's making a botched evening of it, and also felt the need to make up for spoiling at least three other guest's evenings. She turned to Diva with a sigh and discarded her hand into the middle of the table. "With only three of us at one table, I suppose we could try a three-handed Whist which Withers showed me just the other day."

"Don't you think you'd better go home with him?" Diva asked, keeping her voice low.

"If it's any consolation, Diva dear, I have his solemn assurance that he will not accost anyone when he is out by himself."

"That's not what I meant, Elizabeth, and you know it"

Elizabeth sat back in her chair and assumed a resigned air. "Very well. Since you seem insistent on ruining what could have been a perfectly splendid evening of cards, I suppose I have no choice but to humour you and take my leave, as you obviously do not wish to partner me."

Diva looked flustered. "It has nothing to do with me, and you know it. I am concerned for the Major's health, that's all."

"Perhaps then, you might wish to take him home," Elizabeth murmured sarcastically, looking about, and deciding that Diva was showing far too much concern for the Major. She probably knew something. "Or perhaps Mrs. Blanchard would like that honour." She instantly regretted her choice of words, for she saw Diva's ears prick up. That settled it. Elizabeth swept the cards into a pile and rose.

"It has been such a lovely evening, Mrs. Blanchard, but I'm afraid I must accompany my Benjy-boy home. Men can be such babies when they're not the thing."

"Before you go," Hattie said, in full earshot of everyone else, "I have been meaning to ask you if you wouldn't consider allowing me to continue my lease here for another month."

"Pardon me?" Elizabeth asked. She was stunned at Mrs. Blanchard's forwardness, and apparent willingness to be cut down in such a public arena. Never let it be said that Elizabeth denied anyone their heart's desire.

"At the same rate, of course," Mrs. Blanchard added.

Elizabeth applied a humourless smile to her face

and narrowed her eyes, boring straight into Mrs. Blanchard's soul. "I'm afraid I have been too long away from Grebe, Mrs. Blanchard. I miss my poor little house."

Mrs. Blanchard seemed completely unfazed. "All right, then. Two guineas more a week."

Elizabeth's mouth briefly but definitely salivated at the thought of the extra income, but her innate good sense prevailed. She considered the self-restraint which would be required in avoiding murder for the next four weeks and decided that no one had that much self control. "I'm afraid I cannot. Perhaps if you plan to visit us next year, you might ask for a longer let then." Even if Elizabeth had to rent all the available dwellings and reserve all the hotel rooms in town herself, she was determined that would never be possible for Mrs. Blanchard to again come within a hundred miles of the town.

"Ah, well, one cannot be blamed for trying."

'Why not?' Elizabeth said to herself, breathing through her nose to calm herself. Aloud: "It has been a lovely evening, Mrs. Blanchard, simply lovely. The food was delicious, but I see my Benjy beckoning. Good night."

Irene leaned over and whispered into Georgie's ear, "Wonder what's wrong with the Major?"

Georgie looked very uncomfortable, but Irene took no notice. Instead, she adopted a gruffly unmistakable voice, "Undoubtedly malaria. A most virulent and deadly form. Called Ague in the Service." Georgie gasped and playfully slapped her hand. Irene just laughed.

Georgie and Diva found a discreet moment later in the evening to talk quietly. And talk they did.

"Georgie, so far my plans for civilising Elizabeth have been proceeding along quite splendidly." Lucia was sitting in the late morning shade of her new veranda at Mallards, watching his turn at croquet. "Her attitude has certainly become less volatile. After all, you know as well as I do that her lying, for example, is not out of self-interest but simply because it is in her nature. And I am firmly convinced that lying can be trained out of anyone who wishes to make an effort."

Lucia got a dreamy look in her eyes, and a noble, self-sacrificing tone crept into her voice. "I am put in mind of Ovid's Pygmalion: I wish to sculpt Elizabeth into an ideal citizeness."

Georgie missed quite an easy shot and, finding the missed shot and Lucia's attitude about equally exasperating, came over to where Lucia was sitting. "I don't believe that Elizabeth wants you to sculpt her at all. She's getting on in years you know; quite set in her ways. At least I know that I am. You've tried

'moulding' her in the past, and each time was doomed to failure." He sat and mopped his brow. "This heat is beastly for the end of September."

"I'm afraid I cannot agree with your assessment of the situation, Georgino mio," Lucia said, rising and addressing her ball. "Of course, I should be the first to admit that I had long ago given up teaching Elizabeth culture and finesse, but her conduct during Mrs. Blanchard's reign has been exemplary. I never really thought to examine the good points of Elizabeth's nature until Mrs. Blanchard's visit." She leaned forward and prepared to swing. "I have decided to offer to return her seat on the Town Council."

Georgie looked at Lucia in amazement and mild disgust, "No! Lucia! You wouldn't!" He knew that Lucia and Elizabeth were in cahoots, but hadn't realised it had gotten this out of hand.

Lucia didn't flinch as her ball rolled through the wicket. "Yes, caro. Really, I don't know why I didn't think of it before. One of the councillors — the Deputy Mayor as a matter of record — has resigned due to that silly misunderstanding over Irene's little painting. So there is a vacancy, which I am empowered to fill until the regular elections come about. Elizabeth can see first-hand the proper way to handle municipal affairs and hopefully understand the enormous challenges and issues which surround us as custodians of the most beautiful town in all England. I believe she is in the proper frame of mind now, a position she lacked the last time she was on the council."

Georgie felt he needed to change the subject rather abruptly as he was rather afraid that he would otherwise tell Lucia exactly what he thought of her plans to tame Elizabeth. "She is coming to the Pavilion unveiling, I presume?" Georgie asked.

"Naturally. All my Town Councillors are invited."

"Then I would like to add a guest to the list, if you don't mind —" Georgie began.

Lucia smiled. "That would be Mr. Frost, perhaps?"

Georgie frowned at Lucia's perceptiveness. "You know, it really isn't fair that you are so quick, Lucia. You quite spoil all my fun sometimes."

Lucia put on a playful pout. "Poor Lucia not mean to make Georgie-porgie so melancholy. Forgive, caro?"

"Of course," Georgie sighed. "I'm not really angry at you, darling. Just a little disappointed that your poor *sposa mio* could not surprise you."

"So tell me all about your new friend," Lucia asked.

I've been helping out Mr. Frost with... a hobby he is rather good at."

"Raising sunflowers?" Lucia joked kindly.

An eager tone crept into Georgie's voice. "No, actually: racing motor cars! Think of how Mr. Frost's appearance at your party would attract everyone. Why, I'd almost bet that everybody would have to attend if you added Mr. Frost and his motor to your list of party activities."

'And then you wouldn't have to give Mapp a seat on the council to bribe her to come,' he added to himself.

Lucia had secretly been concerned that the other members of society were not yet ready to attend a party given by either herself or Elizabeth, and instantly saw what Georgie was driving at (so to speak). Adding layer upon layer of enticements until her friends were unwilling to stand the thought of not attending was a clever move on Georgie's part. Her respect for his ingenuity rose a notch.

"I can see it all so dearly," Lucia said, standing and becoming very animated. "Mr. Frost pulling up to the front of Mallards with the roar of the engine echoing off the walls of the homes lining West Street. Our friends each taking a turn in the sidecar as Mr. Frost drives them out of town and into the countryside." She pantomimed turning a steering wheel. "Once there, he would then be able to put the motor through its paces quite splendidly. Quite splendidly."

Georgie saw that gleam in Lucia's birdlike eyes which denoted extreme emotion, and he suddenly realised what she had just said.

"How did you know that Mr. Frost has a sidecar on his motor?" he asked, trying not to sound accusatory.

Lucia dropped her arms and smiled guiltily. "I must confess, caro. I saw you two drive out of town one afternoon. Churlish of me not to mention it, I know. But I decided, for your sake, not to say anything. If you did not wish for me to know that you were helping him in his hobby, I thought I'd best not say anything."

"So there is really no surprise left at all, then," Georgie pouted.

"No surprise for me, perhaps. But the Wyses, Irene, and the others will certainly be astonished," Lucia said encouragingly. "Especially if we only hint at the extra attraction and not come right out and tell everyone what to expect. An aura of mystery, I think, would be appropriate for this event."

That thought almost made up for not being able to surprise Lucia. Georgie mopped his brow.

"Thank you, Lucia."

"Oh, Georgie," Lucia suddenly cried, "Do you really think Mr. Frost would agree to come?"

"I'm certain of it," Georgie replied, having already asked him. "Now, it's much too hot to finish the game. As you are winning, I concede. Shall we adjourn to the garden room for some un po' di musical"

"Let us call it a draw," Lucia said, still in a noble frame of mind. "But no music this morning, I think, caro. I have the invitations to write out."

"May I help with them? We need to word them particularly carefully, you know, or they might not all come."

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Fortunately for Major Benjy, Irene's mimicked prognosis was highly inaccurate. Indigestion was the theme Doctor Dobbie espoused, and proscribed several days of bed rest and part of the contents of a bottle of white powder from the chemist's, mixed well with warm water. Elizabeth did not believe that prognosis for a moment, and spent the next four days rising at the cock crow and supervising Withers and Mary as they cleaned the servant's quarters in preparation for returning to Grebe. The Major was thus up at dawn four days running, but did not avail himself of either the golf course or the dub. Elizabeth thought it rather odd that he remained cloistered indoors, and decided he was doing it just to show her how little her cleaning ruckus bothered him. It is doubtful that if she knew the real reason for it, that she would be any happier. She tried discussing the matter with Diva on the fourth morning of Benjy's secreted existence.

"I don't understand it, Diva. Who or what is he hiding from? The obvious answer is Mrs. Blanchard, but why now? After all he has done, certainly he could do very little else to make things worse for himself."

Diva looked sheepish, and hid that fact by examining the books displayed in the window of the lending library. She regretted having given up waiting for apologies from everyone. If she had continued her policy of snubbing, she would not be trapped in this miserable interview. "Haven't a clue. Perhaps he wants to avoid Mrs. Blanchard, so that he can come back to Grebe with you, and doesn't trust her not to make a scene."

Elizabeth mulled this over and found it wanting. "Isn't it the other way round? I expect he is afraid he will lose his self-control at the sight of her. Take the night of the dinner, for example —"

"Yes, very queer goings on," Diva agreed. Although she had little respect, at times, for Elizabeth's machinations, she and Georgie had agreed never to unveil what they had seen (or, rather, heard) that night at Grebe. Diva knew that imparting that information to Elizabeth would cause all sorts of recriminations (both against the Major and against herself, for Elizabeth had a tendency to shoot the messenger). No, what Tilling needed now was healing after all this strife, and Diva was going to do her part.

"Perhaps he truly is ill, and just doesn't feel himself." Elizabeth worried on that for a moment, then glanced up to see Mrs. Blanchard walking toward them.

"Diva, there she is," whispered Elizabeth. Then, more loudly, "Good morning, Mrs. Blanchard. When does your train leave?"

"In about half an hour. I sent Lucy on ahead with the luggage. I wanted to be sure not to miss it as my

ship leaves at ten o'clock tomorrow morning from Southampton."

"Oh it would never do to miss your train," Elizabeth said sweetly. She was quite determined to walk to Southampton barefoot, over ground glass, with Mrs. Blanchard on her back, if that was what it took to get her out of Tilling. "It is such a terrible inconvenience to miss one's boat. I know, having done it myself once."

Mrs. Blanchard appeared quite unimpressed. "Yes, that must have been terribly perturbing. Perhaps you would be good enough to say goodbye to your husband for me? I have not seen him about for the past few days."

"I will certainly do so, Mrs. Blanchard. A pleasure," Elizabeth managed to say without spitting venom.

"Are you considering returning next year?" Diva asked as nonchalantly as she could manage, studying Elizabeth for a reaction and coming away empty-handed.

"Nothing settled," Mrs. Blanchard replied, looking about. "But I must say that the town is so utterly entrancing that I have a feeling I may hear the siren's call before too long."

"That would be a pleasure," Elizabeth cooed, her face serene. "But you mustn't miss your train. Au reservoir." She waved her pudgy little hand at Mrs. Blanchard as she said goodbye to Diva and began walking up the High Street. She glowered, and her darkest nightmares began taking shape in front of her, fed by the possible threat of that woman's return. The prospect of having to deal with both Lucia and Mrs. Blanchard was just too much. Suppose this was some sort of ruse and Mrs. Blanchard wasn't taking a train after all? Perhaps she was meaning to deliberately miss it, then stay in Tilling forever and ever.

As she dissected her worst imaginings, an inspiration struck her. With almost half an hour still to go before the train left Tilling, Elizabeth popped into the toy shop and procured a pair of opera glasses. It was true she already had a pair tucked away at Grebe, and this was thus a squandering of funds, but he must needs go whom the devil doth drive and she did not regret the purchase.

She then proceeded to the walkway about the top of the church tower, which offered a superb view of almost the entire town. Taking the glasses out of her marketing basket, she focused them on the station. The building itself blocked her view of the tracks opposite, but she saw the steam from a train idling at the station. She waited with some impatience as the minutes ticked laboriously by. She had, in fact, almost exhausted her endurance when the whistle blew and the train began moving. From this distance she could not be certain Mrs. Blanchard was on the train, but if the woman did not emerge from the station, nor Lucy, nor their

luggage, she would conclude that they were, indeed, on that moving vehicle. Elizabeth watched the station and, to her mild surprise, spotted Irene leaving the building and saunter up the street, pipe in hand. How fascinating. Had she been to the station to see Mrs. Blanchard off? It somehow didn't seem very likely. Perhaps, then, it was Miss Thalman she had said goodbye to. Yes, Elizabeth decided, that was much more likely as those two had developed an obvious friendship in the last few weeks.

These musings in no way distracted Elizabeth's careful scrutiny of the station, and after a full ten minutes more revealed nothing which would indicate a subterfuge on the part of her former tenant, breathed a hearty sigh of relief. For the first time in two months, Elizabeth felt she could relax.

"Buongiorno, Elizabeth-mia!"

Elizabeth whirled about, startled. There was Lucia, sitting in the corner, sketching away on an easel. She had obviously been there for some time, and Elizabeth in her single-mindedness had not even looked about her until now. Elizabeth smiled. "Good morning, dear Worship. A lovely view, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite. So she has left, has she?"

Elizabeth considered, and then dropped all pretence of being up here for any other reason, and in fact made a clever deduction.

"Indeed she has. Doing a sketch of the rail station, are you?"

Lucia laughed merrily and produced one of her first husband's telescopes. "Yes. So we are finally rid of her. That two month's let was two months too long.

"Oh, by the way, while we can talk uninterrupted, would you be interested in reviving your position on the Town Council?"

"Pardon?" Elizabeth could not believe her ears. Getting rid of Mrs. Blanchard and being offered back her old position as Councillor was a bit much for a single morning.

"You see," Lucia explained, "One of the members recently stepped down, owing to... personal reasons. Councillors are normally elected to their position, but if someone vacates his post in the middle of his tenure, the Council co-opts someone to fill the vacancy until the next elections."

Elizabeth had never quite given up her political ambitions. She had suffered manifold reverses to be sure: including losing her Councillor seat to quaint Irene some time ago, but she had always kept the possibility of regaining political power burning in her breast. Being Lucia's Mayoress was one thing — a figurehead position at best — but to actually be back on the Council?

And Elizabeth thought of something else. The attraction of Mrs. Blanchard was certainly not due to her rapier wit and urbane conversational abilities. It was likely that Tilling flocked to her simply because she

was new and thus, by virtue of her newness, exciting. Although she was loathe to admit it, Mrs. Blanchard's visit had taken Elizabeth's reputation as the social mover and shaker down a few pegs. But if she had fallen, so had Lucia. And Lucia had so much further to fall. And now that they were on more-or-less equal footing, and Mrs. Blanchard had finally returned to America, Elizabeth could get back to the eternal task of putting Lucia in her place. And the power of the Town Council would greatly assist her. Specifically how she was going to use her position was not of immediate importance. She could decide the exact method later. What was important was accepting the position before Lucia recovered her senses.

"If the members of the Town Council believe that I can make a worthy contribution to that August body, who am I to refuse?" She had the vague impulse to kneel and kiss the ring on Lucia's hand, but disregarded it.

"Capital!" cried Lucia. "Actually, the Deputy Mayor has resigned."

Elizabeth felt weak-kneed. "Are you offering me the position of Deputy Mayor?"

"Not right away, of course. We mustn't push the good nature of Tilling's residents too far, too quickly. Bestowing the position of Deputy Mayor upon you so abruptly might be construed as having been done with unseemly haste. But Acting Deputy Mayor if I am ever called away is certainly in the cards."

Elizabeth ground her dental plates together to keep from screaming at Lucia's lofty attitude. She successfully held her disgust in check, and instead smiled sweetly. "How kind of you, Lucia. And quite right. As always."