

The group standing about in the cobbled road just outside the front door of Mallards came to the same realisation almost simultaneously. This was confirmed by the furtive glances of fear they each exchanged with the others. All but Elizabeth, for she was too preoccupied with waving to the long-departed vehicle, with an almost maniacal smile on her face. It was just as well that she was too distracted to see these looks, for she was the subject of this fear. Who could forget the way Elizabeth treated them the last time Lucia had gone away? Elizabeth had been tyrannical, bossy, and opinionated — almost as bad as Lucia on her worst days. But she lacked Lucia's flair for motivating others, and thus Elizabeth's short tenure was more akin to a prison sentence for those assembled. Convinced that Elizabeth could not help but repeat her past performance (a leopard, after all, does not change its spots), they each began breaking off from the group, walking away stiffly and self-consciously (or in the case of the Bartletts, pedalling).

But if any one of them had stayed and observed Elizabeth, they might have realised that this was indeed a changed Elizabeth. She was not viewing the streets of Tilling as owner, but reverently, an attitude befitting an historian eager to preserve the mental image of the town before it was irrevocably altered.

Elizabeth toured the streets, much as Nelson toured the HMS Victory before the Battle of Trafalgar. Unlike that unfortunate captain, however, Elizabeth had every intention of surviving the upcoming battle. She sauntered leisurely down the High Street, vaguely aware that the small town was unusually quiet. The tradesmen were scuttling about as ever, persons of no importance travelling to and fro about their business, but something was absent. Elizabeth was loathe to admit it, but the omission of Lucia was apparent even to her. And in fact, it was only the reaction which the returning woman was sure to display kept Elizabeth in the highest spirits. It was quite demeaning to realise that the basis of her own joy — and perhaps even her reason for existence — seemed to revolve around that woman. It had been so long since Elizabeth had planned any great machinations which did not revolve about Lucia, that she perhaps felt a bit lost without her arch-rival to react against.

Elizabeth paused in her reflections and silently scolded herself. She was getting soft in her middle age, surely. The Mrs. Mapp-Flint she knew had lived quite a long and fruitful life here, marrying a retired Major and setting up house. True, she had originally planned on spending the end of her days in the house which her Great Aunt Caroline owned before Elizabeth received it, but Grebe was not such a bad place, and her life had certainly been full before Lucia showed her face. Surely she could manage without her. She

straightened up and adjusted her marketing basket. She would not allow these melancholy thoughts to dissuade her from the task she had set for herself, and proceeded with her plan to finish her marketing and then go home to lay out Patience cards to pass the hours until the meeting of the Town Council.

When Elizabeth dropped by the tea room later that day, Diva was up to her elbows in customers. She told Elizabeth to pick any free table, and she would be with her shortly. Elizabeth sat and examined the tablecloth which at this point in the day showed the unmistakable signs of having served its purpose of protecting the table underneath. She briefly considered whether saying something about the state of her place setting might induce Diva to shave a few pennies off her bill, but admitted to herself that Diva likely would never agree.

"Sorry about that, Elizabeth," Diva said when she finally had a moment to spare. "Eighteen-penny tea? Indian? Be right back. I have something to say to you."

'And I have something to say to you,' thought Elizabeth merrily, certain that whatever Diva was going to say, she couldn't possibly top her own news.

"My Janet spoke to your Mary the other day," Diva said upon her return, holding a steaming kettle.

"Yes, dear?" Elizabeth smiled distractedly.

"And although we've all heard of Solo — the two-handed Whist — neither she nor Withers have ever heard of a three-handed Whist."

An angelic illumination suffused Elizabeth's face. "Diva dear, what are a few lies between friends?"

Mapp had always cultivated aggression rather than harmony as a proper model of social interaction, and thus Diva had been ready for an argument, expecting that Elizabeth would remain true to form and launch a counterattack, or adopt a superior attitude, or at least pretend ignorance of their previous conversation. But to simply admit her duplicity like that demonstrated a nerve so great that even Mrs. Godiva Plaistow was rendered momentarily speechless.

Diva decided that Lucia's leaving the field wide open by going on holiday, and Mapp's move to Grebe had finally done in the poor woman. During her frequent walks she had often spotted Elizabeth lurking behind the drapes of the front room at Grebe. How absurd! There were only clumps of grass and the tide to spy upon there. Diva considered it totally undignified for a middle-aged lady of means (albeit rather limited means) to stoop to peering out between curtains. True, spying on seagulls from behind the blinds did not, in itself, prove an unbalanced mind, but being so far from things when she had always been in the centre of town must be very trying for someone of Elizabeth's temperament.

It was only at that moment that Diva recalled that her friend had a Council meeting today. Surely that might account for the woman's odd behaviour, for her

cheerful admission was most out of character.

As if to verify Diva's unspoken thought, Elizabeth said, "Today was the day, dear Diva. I feel wonderful. You see, the Council has accepted my suggestions for public improvements."

The way Mapp announced that sent a chill through Diva, and although she would have been hard-pressed to explain its source, her intuition nonetheless remained an accurate barometer of matters. She looked up to see the Padre lead in another group of tourists, for the second time that day. "Your suggestions? Which ones?" she asked distractedly.

"Ah," Elizabeth waved her hands. "They were not, strictly speaking, my suggestions. I did, after all, poll all my friends for their opinions on ways to improve the quality of life for all of us here in my little town."

Diva felt another chill as Elizabeth said 'my little town' and barely suppressed a shudder. She cleared her throat and put up a brave front, one she did not feel. She folded her arms. "And exactly what might that include?" she asked scornfully.

"Why, the ideas you and Mr. and Mrs. Wyse and the Padre and Evie — all your suggestions. Obviously I did not propose every one of them. Just one for now. Mrs. Bellwether was most supportive. To my surprise, it appears the project I proposed had originally been ridiculed and then tabled by none other than our beloved Mayor. And due to a recent spat (something to do with a little painting's of Irene, I seem to recall) Mrs. Bellwether was rather inclined to see things my way. Of course, her natural common sense was also a factor, I am certain. A sweet woman, really. I believe I shall invite her to tea sometime." Elizabeth was clearly enjoying herself, spinning out her revelation before Diva's agonised ears. Elizabeth had easily picked up on her impatience, and had some sympathy for her. Not enough to curb this doubtlessly agonising production, but it was sympathy, nonetheless. Poor dear, this was no doubt going to be a shock to her.

"And which proposal did you get approved?" Diva asked, exasperated, signalling to the Padre that she would be attending him in a moment.

"Dear one, it was actually your suggestion. Do you recall — wait, what was it you said? No, don't help me. Ah! I remember now: 'widening our quaint roads.' An exact quote, I believe."

Diva's brows furrowed. "But which roads, Elizabeth? Most, if not all, the buildings in Tilling about the pavements. You'd have to tear them down in order to widen any of the roads, surely?"

"I agree it may have the potential of imposing a slight hardship on some of us," Elizabeth replied wistfully.

"But, as Worship always likes to remind us, we must not look to our own personal sacrifices when such a project will benefit so many."

Diva gasped, finally realising the full implication of Elizabeth's announcement and set the kettle down

onto the table. "Not — not the High Street, surely?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Certainly not, sweet one. I would never allow that. The Padre and Evie, the Wyses, and of course quaint Irene, are in no danger of losing their homes. And Grebe, naturally, is outside the parish boundaries, so any resolution by the Tilling council would not extend out to my house."

Diva visibly relaxed and even managed a smile. They both heard the Padre clear his throat, and Diva turned to go. "Good to hear, Elizabeth. For a moment, I was convinced that this might be another of your schemes for serving out..." She suddenly felt rather ill and looked Elizabeth straight in the eye. "No! You couldn't possibly..."

"Whatever do you mean, dear Diva?" Elizabeth asked, smiling her widest and showing two rows of perfect teeth. "Are you feeling unwell? You look a little "

"Mistress Plaistow?" the Padre called out. Diva ignored him.

"Not Mallards!" Diva said in a strangled whisper.

"Not Mallards? Certainly not. Not the main house, at least. But it would certainly open up that end of West Street if, say, the garden room, Mallards Cottage and perhaps Mrs. Wyses' old house — currently vacant — were... removed."

"When?" asked Diva, reduced to monosyllabic questioning.

Elizabeth glanced at her wristwatch and saw immediately that this little joke only further agitated her dear friend. "Tomorrow morning, I should think. Or the next day. I spoke to the town clerk and he offered to set up the specifics."

"The town clerk — and the whole Council — would allow you to tear down Lucia's home?" Diva realised that something didn't quite set right with this entire scenario. She was convinced that the Town Council, most of whom were fiercely loyal to their Mayor of three years, would never have knowingly consented to this sort of thing.

Elizabeth shrugged. "It takes only a simple majority vote. Not that I should have expected you to know anything about municipal matters. But I suppose this just goes to show that Lucia's supposed munificence and her hold over the innocent citizens of Tilling has come to an end. She is evidently not as popular as she would have led us to believe."

Diva straightened up. "I don't believe you," she finally announced.

Elizabeth sighed as if preparing to correct an unruly child and produced the work order. Diva studied it and was forced to believe. She slowly handed it back. "But what of the Major? Isn't he still living at the Cottage?"

"I am not convinced that his whereabouts are a matter for public scrutiny, dear one."

Diva suddenly felt rather disgusted with Elizabeth (and desired to alleviate the Padre's distress). "Well,

Elizabeth! If that's all you've got to say, you'll have to excuse me. I have other customers to attend to."

She instantly resolved what she must do, despite the staggering cost of a trunk call. She was certain that Hamlet would have agreed with her: something was rotten in the state of Denmark. She apologised to the Padre and his guests for being held up for so long and hurried off to refill her kettle with boiling water before offering it to her disgruntled patrons.

Major Benjy mopped his brow. He looked about the Cottage and sighed. It really had not been a bad place to spend his time. Once he had thrown the most excessive of Georgie Pillson's petit point pillows, woolwork curtains, silk embroideries and other fey decorations into the cupboard under the stairs, he felt almost at home. It was a quiet place, large enough for himself and the servant he had hired from the agency on a fortnight to fortnight basis, and really just right for a bachelor. Trouble was, of course, that he was no longer a bachelor, a fact made plain to him by a visit from his wife.

She announced her presence by banging the front door sharply. This almost caused the Major to spill his lunch, and certainly was the cause of his frantic movement to hide the half-empty glass under the nearest fern.

After rather stiff introductions, Elizabeth sat down next to Benjy on the little sofa and spoke to him of duty and obligation. Just for a moment, the Major felt that she was going to mention forgiveness. But even without that last, he somehow felt he should remove his cap (which he was not wearing) and begin a refrain of Rule Britannia.

"I am weary of being a laughing stock," she had told him (which was news to him). "This entire personal disaster is inappropriate for one so newly re-elected to the Town Councillor.

"But, I must say," she said, mellowing somewhat, "your conduct has been almost exemplary, as befits a man performing penance. I have not received a bill for liquor since just after you moved here. That shows a commendable restraint and desire to avoid a repetition of the type of incident which led you to this sorry state.

"Since I feel you have done your best to mend your ways, it is my Christian duty to reciprocate in kind by allowing you to return to Grebe." She leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. He turned bright red.

"That's awful noble of you, Liz," the Major heard himself say, with far less enthusiasm and sincerity than he felt. Still, he was painfully aware of his duty as husband, and would never let it be said that Major Benjamin Flint shirked his responsibilities, no matter how arduous.

Elizabeth left, suggesting he vacate immediately. He wondered for a moment why she seemed so adamant, but then let it go. He was getting used to

being too slow to follow his wife's twisted labyrinths of logic. He was indeed willing to vacate immediately, with his only concern being how to dismantle (and where to store) the whisky still he had installed in the basement.

Lucia and Georgie had arrived just in time for the first race of the three-day contest. They passed the temporary stands and walked over to the cluster of trucks and cars, easily locating Mr. Frost's van. Along with Mr. Frost were two slim young men whom Georgie had met once or twice before in Mr. Frost's garage. Brian and Clive were oddly quiet during his visits. In fact, the pair had quite unnerved Georgie by following him about. They remained some ten or twelve feet away from him at all times, and whenever he would turn in their direction, they would look about as if they had just noticed the grass or the sky. He attempted to begin a conversation with them at several points, but they gave only monosyllabic responses, forcing him to give up. Now that he thought about it, he considered the possibility that the two mechanics were only comfortable around inanimate objects such as motorcars, or perhaps they had bad teeth and were embarrassed to talk with him.

Mr. Frost, on the other hand, was as genial as ever.

"My dear Lucia! How nice to see you again! And Mr. George. Well, I'm relieved to see you've got here in time for the opening race. It begins in less than an hour."

Lucia smiled. "We are so looking forward to it! Why, everyone in Tilling has done nothing but talk about motors for the past few weeks. Tell me, is there a trophy of some sort for the winner?"

"Two," Mr. Frost said, wiping his hands on an oily rag. "First and second place. Nothing big. We all do this just for fun, of course."

Lucia smiled. "Of course."

Suddenly the air was filled with a sharp, "Georgie! Lucia!" Though Lucia felt that bellowing across the course like that showed a certain lack of breeding, it was clearly delivered by someone with operatic training. Lucia turned to find the source of this questionable conduct and saw Olga Shuttleworth gliding off the stands toward them, her long blue dress trailing behind her.

"Olga! Sweet! Why, whatever are you doing here?" Lucia cried in astonishment, extending her arms toward her, and proffering her face to be kissed.

"Olga!" cried Georgie.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Georgie?"

"Of course I am! You're always so tarsome! How could you possibly think otherwise? Mr. Frost, this is Mrs. Olga Shuttleworth. A great and dear friend."

"My pleasure," Mr. Frost replied, then paused. "Not the Olga? Brunnhilde and so on? But Shuttleworth? I thought..."

"I see you've heard of me," Olga said with mock

modesty. "I have since married, hence Shuttleworth." She turned to Georgie. "Just back from a tour of Salome. Roaring success, thank goodness, or I should have had to retire in infamy and live my remaining days in seclusion in some villa in Capri." She turned to Lucia.

"When Georgie wrote to me in his latest letter that you two were going to Maxwell Park to watch motorcar racing and, well, having simply nothing to do, I thought it might be fun to come down and surprise you. It looks as if I have succeeded! Georgie, give me a cigarette, will you?" He lit one for her, and she took a long drag. "Marvellous. Georgie, you have the most exquisite taste. Oh, there's Turzio." Olga pointed to a dashing middle-aged man with jet black hair who was just pulling himself out of what could only be a brand-new red car. Lucia thought she recognised it as a Maserati. Olga called out, "Buon giorno, Turzio!" He waved to her and strode over. "Buon giorno, Olga. So nice to see you again."

Lucia had not realised the significance of the colour of the man's car, but his accent left no room for doubt. Red must be the colour for Italy, just as green was for England. What was it with Olga and Italians, anyway? Were all her friends put on this earth simply to repeatedly humiliate herself and Georgie when it is revealed (time and again) that their Italian, although perfect in its expression, was of an extremely limited selection?

Introductions were handed around, and Mr. Frost began a friendly discussion with Turzio regarding the relative merits of their machines, insisting that the Auto Union motorcars required installation of separate water pipes, as the tubular side members tended to leak. As a rejoinder, Turzio repeated his famous statement that brakes were no good, they made you go slower. At that, Olga slapped him playfully on the shoulder and laughed goodnaturedly. Lucia was taken aback to see this casual familiarity with a man who was not your husband, and excused herself and Georgie on the pretence of being certain to get good seats.

Relieved to be getting away without Olga attempting to drag her into a conversation in Italian (she, who naturally professed to be a poor Italian linguist, was nonetheless quite proficient), she was feeling slightly betrayed by her husband. "Georgie, why didn't you tell me you had invited Olga?"

Georgie didn't much like her tone, but could guess that the threat of Italian had unnerved her. He glanced behind him to be sure that Brian and Clive were not following him. Satisfied, he turned his full attention to soothing the savage breast. "I didn't invite her, you know. I simply told her of our plans. I actually had no idea she was back in London. I guessed it would be another few weeks or so until she even received my letter." This was not strictly true, but occasional little

white lies were one of his concessions to ensure matrimonial bliss. He actually hadn't invited her: she came down on her own. Nevertheless, it was likely that if he pushed the point, Lucia would not believe him. He smiled at the thought of Olga's beautiful face and suggested they dine together that evening.

They took their places on the wooden bench near the racecourse and Lucia adjusted her hat. Olga soon joined them and the drivers began manoeuvring their cars into position for the first race. The sun was hot, the cars bellowed smoke and noise, and the crowd swelled. The excitement was palpable, and Georgie pulled out one of his best embroidered silk handkerchiefs and dabbed at his forehead.

The excitement soon rose to a fever pitch as the motorcars were assigned their starting positions, and a man with a flag assumed a prominent position alongside the starting line. Suddenly a whistle blew, the flag was waved, and the air was filled with the roar of engines as the racing cars darted off down the course, sleek and hungry and swift. Lucia found herself standing along with the rest of the crowd as the cars grew distant along the far side of the course, and they remained standing and even cheered as the cars, each vying for front position, came roaring past the stands. The first mishap occurred just past the stands when one of the cars began billowing black smoke and pulled off the course to roll to a stop. The driver of the silver Mercedes-Benz jumped out of his car seemingly to escape the smoke. Instead, he strode around to the back of the car and began kicking the tires and screaming at the car. Lucia felt that it was likely just as well that the roar of the other cars prevented anyone from hearing what he said. She nevertheless found the German's conduct fascinating, and was startled when she returned her gaze to the course to see Mr. Frost's car pull off into the mechanic's area. She motioned to Georgie and Olga to follow and they hurried over.

Clive and Brian were busy helping him out of the vehicle. He looked a bit green around the edges, and breathlessly explained, "I sometimes get so wound up for these races, my stomach goes bad. I can't finish."

"Oh, dear!" cried Lucia, her voice tense. "What does that mean for you and the other races. You can't possibly win first place now, can you?"

"Nor likely place at all," smiled Mr. Frost weakly as he sat on the grass, assuming her concern was for his own wellbeing. "Not to worry, this has happened before. I'll be better in time for tomorrow's race."

Lucia looked for a moment at Mr. Frost, then at the car. She had invested quite a bit of time and funds into this race, and was determined to get her money's worth. Besides, Mr. Frost had been such a gentleman throughout this entire affair that she felt he deserved not to be let down. (And she admitted that perhaps a minor motivation was the vision of a first place trophy. The image was bright and distinct, hovering quietly in

the background of her imagination. She would certainly settle for second or third place, of course.) The accompanying reclame in helping Mr. Frost to win first place (or second, if necessary) aided her in overcoming her quite legitimate qualms about driving at such high speeds with relatively little training. She carefully removed her hat and handed it to Georgie. She then bent over and retrieved Mr. Frost's goggles and leather driving cap before proceeding over to the motor.

Mr. Frost lifted his head. "The wheel's been playing up a bit. Pulling to the right. Watch out for that."

Lucia acknowledged the suggestion and turned to Georgie. "Please help me in."

Olga stood there stunned and Georgie's mouth dropped open. "What?" he asked incredulously. "You can't be serious!"

"I have never been more serious. Quickly! We haven't time to spare. The race is on!"

Georgie crossed his arms, a dramatic gesture made somewhat less effective with Lucia's hat flopping about. "I have allowed you many things during our long friendship, and our marriage, but this is too much. If you choose to go through with this I... I shall divorce you!" he said, surprising himself almost as much as Olga.

"Don't be ridiculous, Georgie. Help me into the car." She extended her hand and Georgie automatically took it, assisting her into the motor, all the while vowing never to speak to her again, to return home with Cadman, to file for divorce, and to go spend the rest of his days in infamy in France or somewhere worse (perhaps Ireland). Lucia seated herself, adjusted the goggles, waved, and finally roared off in a cloud of dust and engine vapours.

"Oh, she makes me so angry!" Georgie cried out to no one in particular.

"Yes," agreed Olga. "But it's all terribly exciting! Who but Lucia would have the wherewithal to just jump into the fray like that? There's no one quite like her, is there?"

"No, and thank goodness," Georgie said, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. He turned to her. "I don't know what I would do without you, Olga. You're a lifesaver."

"Don't be so silly, Georgie. This lifesaver wants to see the rest of the race, so let's get back up in the stand where we can see everything."

That evening found Lucia seated on the couch with a small bandage on her forehead. She had changed out of her racecourse-muddied clothing, and was reigning centre stage, retelling her daring escapade of that afternoon. Olga and Turzio sat in the middle of the hotel room floor, smoking like chimneys and bellowing Italian at each other. Brian and Clive were

off in the corner where a buffet table had been set up, busily clearing off the last of the tea cakes. The rest of the smoky room was filled top to bottom with the other drivers and their mechanics. All told, there had to be a good twenty-five people in the tiny room. Georgie was reminded of the celebration after a rugby match, though the different racing uniforms gave the room a kaleidoscope of colours no rugby team could ever hope to match.

Amid the cheering and general hoopla, the telephone began ringing. It was difficult to locate, having been buried under some newspapers tossed there by a distracted party guest, but it was eventually located and Georgie picked up the receiver, expecting to be informed that the dining room was ready for them.

"Pillson? Yes, yes, I'm Mr. Pillson." Georgie put his finger in his other ear to try and understand the voice on the other end of the telephone. He was slightly hard of hearing, and the raucous activity in the room certainly did not help matters.

"Who? Diva! Hello!" Georgie shouted into the telephone. "What a nice surprise! You'll never guess what happened! Mr. Frost took ill during the beginning of the first race. And — would you believe it — Lucia hopped into the car to finish the race! I told her that if she was determined to be so reckless that I would divorce her."

There was a squawk on the other end of the line which Georgie took as encouragement, and continued.

"Of course I would never do such a thing, Diva. Lucia actually made it around the course twice before she hit Turzio's car as he came up alongside her. What? No, Turzio," Georgie repeated carefully, "the famous racing car driver. You know: 'brakes make you go slower'. That Turzio. They both are quite all right, but poor Mr. Frost's car is rather a mess! Not to worry. He doesn't know it yet, but Lucia is going to buy him a new one.

"And Turzio doesn't hold it against Lucia. He said he'd never seen a woman handle a car so well," Georgie said, pride evident in his voice. "Anyway, the other drivers were so impressed that Lucia would even try to race in their contest, they dragged her out of her car and carried her off!" Georgie giggled. "It was just like at the boat races. I felt it was a bit lascivious, but as Lucia said, we must make concessions to foreigners who don't have the manners we are accustomed to. They're all here now, celebrating.

"Oh, how tarsome," Georgie muttered, looking down. "Someone's spilled champagne on my trousers." He looked up to see Brian and Clive watching him and he began fidgeting. "It was wonderful of you to call, Diva — Olga Shuttleworth is here as well — and all of us will probably be home late tomorrow. Since there's no racing car anymore, there's no point in staying. Do be a brick and let Grosvenor know they'll be four extra places for dinner. Goodbye."

He hung up the receiver and returned to the festivities, only to be once again summoned to the telephone. With great difficulty and a great deal of yelling on the part of Diva, Georgie began to realise that something was very wrong. He called Lucia over to the telephone. She listened intently, a task made somewhat easier by the carousers momentarily losing heart at being abandoned by the object of their adoration, and Diva took quick advantage of the lull. Georgie stood by and watched Lucia's face change from joyful happiness to an expression of the blackest anger. No, it wasn't quite anger, Georgie decided. It was much, much worse. Perhaps contemptuous loathing might be more accurate. What could Diva have said for Lucia to react that way?

Lucia hung up the receiver and turned to Georgie. She spoke through clenched teeth. "She's got the Town Council to agree to widen the road at the top of West Street. The garden room, Mallards Cottage and the house with the crooked chimney are all to come down." Georgie didn't need an interpreter to know who she was. "Elizabeth wouldn't! She couldn't! How wicked of her!" he cried. Olga came over, hearing the anguish in Georgie's voice, and was instantly appraised of the situation.

The more Georgie thought about it, the more he fumed. He really was fed up with her shenanigans and he finally sputtered out the worst punishment he could conceive of. "Why," he finally said in exasperation, "what Mrs. Mapp-Flint really needs is a firm spanking!" "Oh, Georgie! Don't be so silly," Olga reprimanded, then turned to Lucia. "My dear, what will you do? The woman is dearly dotty. You're still Mayor — can't you stop her?"

Lucia was standing quite still, a faraway look in her eyes, the look she so often used when listening to Beethoven. But that was clearly not the case here.

While it was true that Michaelmas had come and gone, Lucia felt — and rightly so — that this time, finally, it was war. She was like mighty Saint Michael, a leader of angels fighting against the dragon. Surely it did not take a genius to realise that there was to be war in heaven... or at least in Tilling, which amounted to much the same thing as far as the residents of that beautiful little town were concerned.

Lucia collected herself abruptly, and seemed to bore her bird-like eyes into Georgie's very soul, so mighty and terrible was the look. In a quiet voice, Lucia said, "You're quite right, Georgie. That is exactly what she needs."

"It is?" he asked, not following Lucia at all.

She spun about and clasped Olga's hands. "Olga, darling, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Of course, Lucia. Anything. I am entirely at your disposal." She winked at Georgie, getting caught up in

the excitement herself. Racecourse driving was nothing compared to happenings in Tilling!

Seeing that she held their attention, Lucia assumed an infuriating drawl. "How it saddens me when I must stoop to that woman's level. Her petty carping and scheming does wear one down. It is too tedious for words." She sighed. "Ah, well. One must shoulder the burden of his lot in life, accepting what Nature offers with quiet grace."

Georgie had often heard Lucia spout such rubbish. Despite the fact that Elizabeth regularly infuriated her, she fully enjoyed putting down Elizabeth's meddlesome antics. And this eloquent speech was clearly more for Olga's benefit than his. He repeated Olga's question, "My dear, what will you do?"

Lucia smiled at Olga. "I would be grateful if I could borrow your motor and chauffeur —"

"Uh —of course."

"— and some of your expertise."

Georgie gave her a penetrating look and asked, "Just what are you up to, Lucia?"

Lucia gave her silvery laugh, which she had long ago determined began on A flat above the treble clef. "You will see, Georgino mio. It's time someone finally put that woman in her place."

Lucia proceeded to outline her plan. As it unfolded, both Georgie and Olga grew wide-eyed. Neither one would ever have guessed the audacity which Lucia was prepared to exercise. The plan would clearly call upon all of Lucia's considerable acting talent, and the more she discussed her plans, the more exciting they sounded. Georgie's only regret was, for this deception to come off properly, it necessitated his remaining here at Maxwell Park with Olga. An arrangement he did not consider wholly unappealing, to be sure. And although Lucia knew her Georgino mio too well to even consider the possibility that he would attempt anything with even the hint of impropriety (poor Major Benjy!), he did occasionally exhibit a rather excessive schwarm for the prima donna. But these were desperate times, calling for desperate measures, and Lucia was soon deep in preparation for what was certain to be her greatest performance.

Elizabeth paced back and forth furiously, like a caged cat. She had arrived at Mallards almost an hour ago, having been up since dawn. Indeed, she could not recall the last time she had such a delicious sleep, secure in the knowledge of her coming triumph. The morning had been warm after an overnight light frost, and her heart was glad. Her Attic day was finally here: the moment when she would return, with interest, all that Lucia had taken from her.

She fidgeted, for the wrecking crew was late. They had been due directly after lunch. If they did not show soon, she was prepared to lay gelignite along the foundation and perform the job herself. Then it struck

her that perhaps the foreman did not receive her message in which she "corrected" the addresses of the buildings which he was to dismantle. She debated whether or not she should stop by those slums to be sure he was not following the town clerk's directions.

She heaved a great sigh of relief upon hearing the rumble of machinery, and turned to see a large vehicle wielding a wrecking ball. The sight filled her heart with joy. It lumbered slowly up West Street from the High Street, the bellowing of its engine rebounding off the homes lining the street. Elizabeth was glad they had arrived so early. No one else should be out and about at this hour, the morning marketing having already been over for some time, thus they would be unable to stop her once the deed was done.

The vehicle rumbled up to the turning point in front of the garden room and came to a stop. The tension was so completely unnerving that Elizabeth found she had both hands clenched into tight balls. She practised some deep breathing and tried to relax.

"Good afternoon!" she called out.

The man descended from the cab. "Afternoon ma'am. I'm Mr. Ebeling, the foreman on the job today."

"Very nice," Elizabeth said impatiently. "Now, get to work on that building right in front of you, please," she said, pointing to the garden room.

"Surely. Where's the authorisation to demolish it?"

"Pardon?" Elizabeth paused, suddenly feeling the vestiges of illness: here she was on the verge of victory, and this man was stalling. "I am the temporary Deputy Mayor! You will do as I command."

Mr. Ebeling scratched his head. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but this here wrecking ball don't go crashing into that house until I get a copy of the signed by-law sayin' as how my boys and I aren't liable."

Elizabeth was so close to her goal she couldn't stand it. She had managed it all so well up to this point, only to have an insolent foreman stand between her and the satisfaction of getting back at Lucia. If she had been a shade less a lady, she would have had a few choice words for him, to remind him of his place in society. As it was, she found herself trembling violently.

"Exactly what do I need to show you in order for you to follow the orders given to you by the Town Council?" she asked through clenched teeth. She still had enough of her wits about her not to grind her plates together, but she distinctly felt the urge creeping up on her.

"Well, ma'am," he replied, "I'd need to see the actual signed paper, stamped by the town clerk, before I can send this wrecking ball into that building over there."

"I shall return home this instant and get it. And then I will see these buildings brought down."

"Yes, madam."

Elizabeth fairly ran home and dug through her

desk to find that elusive piece of paper. Rather than waste time (and energy) running back, she hired a taxi to return her to town. The taxi proceeded down the High Street and turned up West Street. As it did, Elizabeth spotted an unfamiliar Daimler ahead of them, imperiously inching its way up the narrow avenue of West Street. She had no choice but to follow behind until the motor came to a halt this side of the wrecking ball. She jumped out of the taxi, paid the driver, and approached the foreman once again, the paper fluttering in the breeze.

At the precise moment she passed the strange car, the chauffeur got out and opened the door. Elizabeth paused and watched as an elderly woman descended from the vehicle. The woman wore the darkest widow's weeds and was walking with the aid of a pair of walking sticks. Her grey hair peeked out from under a large hat with a fine mourning veil attached, and Elizabeth estimated her to be easily in her late eighties. What on earth could she possibly want?

"Excuse me," Elizabeth said a shade more forcefully than perhaps was necessary, "but I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to move your motor. I would hate to see it damaged."

The old woman performed a long, appraising look of Elizabeth, taking her in from head to foot. Elizabeth thought she noted one of the woman's eyes was rather cloudy. So she was half-blind as well as lame.

"Since when do you speak to me in that tone, young lady?" the stranger asked.

Elizabeth frowned in confusion. "Pardon me?"

"You heard me, little miss." The woman suddenly broke into a smile. "Doesn't your Great Aunt Caroline get a hug from her niece?"

Elizabeth was absolutely speechless. "What?" was all she managed to sputter. She took a step back. This was all too much. "I don't understand..." she began, desperately wishing for a quiet place to sit and think.

Aunt Caroline stepped back from her embrace and motioned to the paper Elizabeth was holding. "What is that, dear?"

Elizabeth took a sharp breath and stared at the page as if it were a death warrant. She was holding in her hand an authorisation to tear down a room of the very house which Aunt Caroline had left her. Despite an overwhelming feeling of dread, and with every instinct in her body screaming at her to tear that particular piece of parchment to shreds, she nevertheless found herself handing the paper to her Aunt, who read it over rapidly. The response was vehement and immediate. "What! Tear down the garden room? Preposterous!"

Elizabeth winced at the diatribe she was certain was going to follow. Her Aunt would surely wax eloquently on the perils of leaving your property to those who could not appreciate the history and importance of leaving intact the family estate.

"I can explain..." was all she got out before Aunt

Caroline began again.

"I'm so glad you are here to stop them, Lizzie. This authorisation is quite appalling. Why, in my youth I would have chained myself to that iron railing in the corner there, just like one of those suffragettes. But we don't need to go that far, of course. I see the town clerk has authorised this silliness. Come, let us have lunch and we can discuss this monstrous piece of legislation. Where would we find the town clerk?"

Elizabeth trembled with relief. So Aunt Caroline assumed (quite naturally) that Elizabeth was there to prevent this odious desecration from proceeding, despite the fact she had actually been there to incite it. There was some kind of Divine Providence at work here, and Elizabeth — though occasionally hard-pressed to believe in an Almighty who would allow someone like Lucia to descend upon Elizabeth's little protectorate — was going to take advantage of it.

Aunt Caroline was hobbling toward the front door of Mallards, acting for all the world as if Elizabeth still owned that piece of ancestral property. This would not do. Grosvenor would most likely object to Elizabeth hauling in a stranger to have lunch in Lucia's home. And Elizabeth was not so certain that Aunt Caroline would understand the change of ownership, nor the loss of her weeping ash (which Lucia had found rather ugly and had removed). She saw the by-law disappear into the folds of her Aunt's dress and nearly swooned. But Elizabeth Mapp-Flint was not someone to be so easily flustered, and she rallied.

"I have a better idea. Why don't we go have some lunch at a quaint little tea room in the High Street? It's quite the best in town."

Aunt Caroline paused in her ponderous walk to the front door. "Very well, then. Shall we take my Daimler? I see that you've kept Mallards in quite good repair. The bricks look as if they had been recently repointed. Quite satisfactory."

She might be half-blind and elderly, Elizabeth mused, but the woman's comments about the exterior of the house showed she still possessed a keen intellect and a sharp eye (if only the single one).

They turned to walk back to the car when they heard a garden gate bang. Looking down along the high brick wall leading from Mallards to the Cottage, they saw Major Benjy emerging from the servant's entry. He was wheeling a wheelbarrow laden with what appeared to be nothing more than some pipes and a sack of grain, perhaps wheat. He proceeded for several feet toward them before perceiving he had an audience. He glanced up and saw Elizabeth and his expression instantly changed to one of fear, and he began looking about him as if he were a terrified mole caught in the beam of an electric torch. Elizabeth could not quite determine what her husband was doing with all those odd things nor why he was carting them around, but decided to ignore him amid hopes that

Caroline would not remark upon him. Alas, to no avail.

"Who is that man?"

"Which man?" Elizabeth asked, looking in the other direction.

"That one there, coming toward us with a wheelbarrow. A sort of soldierly-looking chap."

Elizabeth sighed. It seemed unavoidable. "My husband, Aunt Caroline. Major Benjamin Flint."

"I see. I approve most highly of your marriage to a member of His Majesty's armed forces. Very satisfactory."

Elizabeth introduced the Major once he reached them, and Elizabeth couldn't help notice that he lacked his usual shifty-eyed attitude, and was instead jovial and straightforward. He was clearly nervous about something. As they chatted, Elizabeth examined the contents of the wheelbarrow, but still could not fathom the reasons for such an eclectic grouping of items. She had a suspicion that whatever they were being used for was not entirely above board, and decided not to press the issue until she could get him alone. Mercifully, Aunt Caroline also seemed disinterested and ignored the equipment. Major Benjy offered to join them at Diva's once he had taken care of his little errand and, tipping his hat to the both of them, turned around, retraced his steps and fairly barrelled down the street toward the church.

As the car crept backward down West Street and backed into Porpoise Street (Aunt Caroline apparently had a tremendous fear of speed and continually reprimanded her chauffeur to travel more slowly), Elizabeth was thinking furiously. She had had not the slightest notion that her Great Aunt was still living. Indeed, she had never actually met her before now (despite her previous allusions to the contrary) and had naturally assumed, when her own mother had died and the will specified that Elizabeth was to inherit Aunt Caroline's Mallards, that there were no other living family members. Seemingly she had come to the wrong conclusion.

The chauffeur successfully turned the motor around and they proceeded slowly toward the High Street. Aunt Caroline was talking.

"How well I remember your Uncle's funeral all those years ago. This street is not unlike the one at home. In those days, of course, the carriage was pulled by a team of black horses wearing those great black plumes. I was in the trailing coach, which had been draped in black. We hired a dozen or so Mutes to mourn for him. People lined the streets, the men removing their hats as we passed. All very moving. All rather touching."

At this point, Caroline pulled off the glove from her right hand, produced a black handkerchief from the depths of her dress, and reached up under her veil to dab at her eyes. Elizabeth felt that she should say something, but wasn't quite certain what. She had the

impression Uncle Charles must have died long ago, and was put in mind of the conduct of Queen Victoria, who remained in widow's weeds long after her Prince Consort had passed on. She settled for patting her Aunt's hands, and casually noted that it looked exceptionally youthful for someone of her age.

Elizabeth decided she would leave Caroline at the front door of Diva's Tea Room and promise to visit the town clerk's office herself to straighten out "this little misunderstanding."