
Opening Extract from...

Lucia on Holiday

Written by Guy Fraser-Sampson

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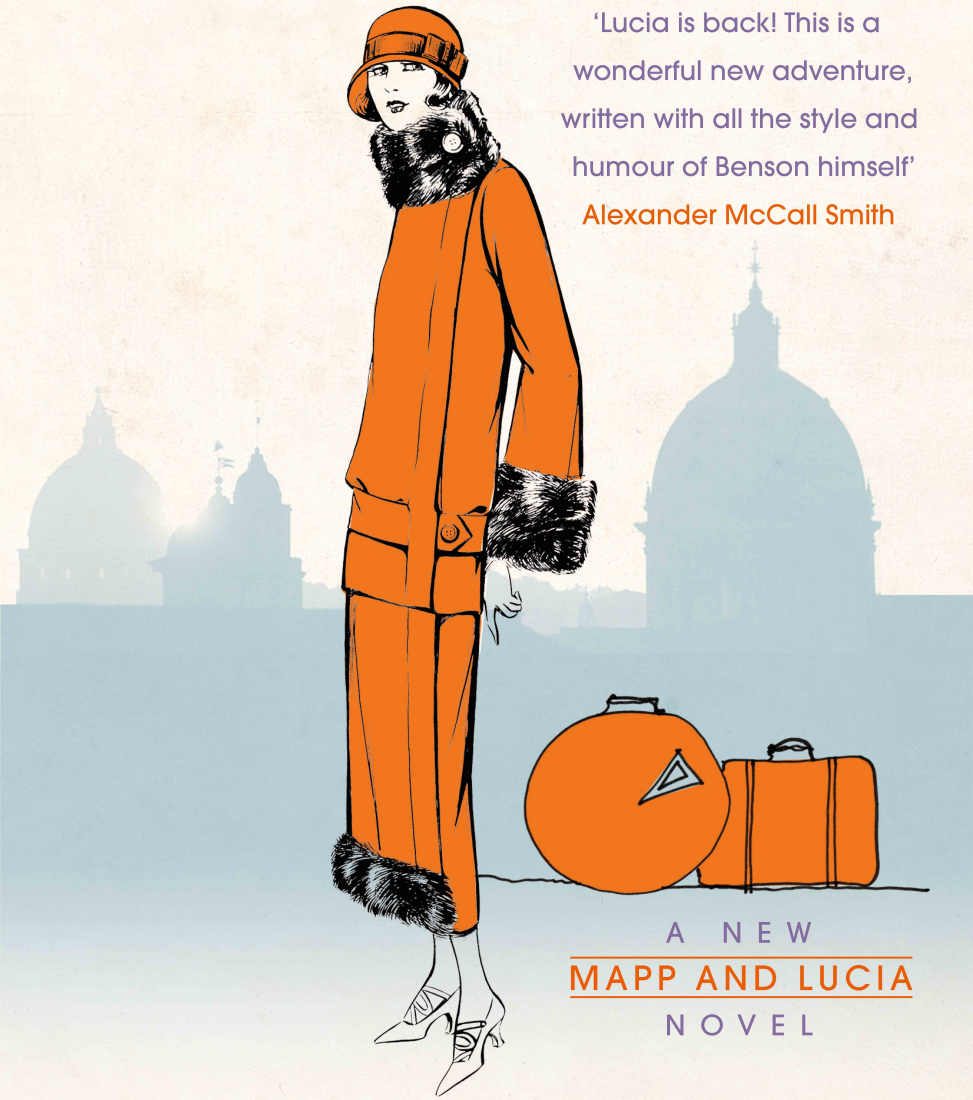
LUCIA ON HOLIDAY

'Lucia is back! This is a wonderful new adventure, written with all the style and humour of Benson himself'
Alexander McCall Smith



A NEW
MAPP AND LUCIA
NOVEL

GUY FRASER-SAMPSON

Lucia on Holiday

Guy Fraser-Sampson

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Author's Note

Those readers with even a passing knowledge of history will notice that *Lucia on Holiday* makes use of certain real-life events, the timing of which may not appear to sit easily within whatever chronology can be discerned from Benson's own novels. By way of mitigation, it can however be safely submitted that Benson himself was obviously not much concerned with the time and space continuum of the physical world. Anyone who can change the spelling of people's names (a proud tradition occasionally also practised by the writer), allow characters to disappear without explanation, move an entire town at will from one county to another, and completely ignore any mention of the First World War is most unlikely to have been troubled by such trifles as international conflicts, the fall of thrones, and the gyrations of financial markets. Thus it is to be hoped that any readers who exhibit a tiresome attachment to reality may be prevailed upon to treat any such aberrations as occasions when Homer has nodded.

The Bugatti Royale, known more prosaically as the Type 41, was indeed intended by Ettore Bugatti to be owned only by royalty. However, in the event just seven were ever built, partly because the Great Depression affected even royalty, and partly perhaps because Bugatti was rather too choosy about his customers. As well as rejecting requests from numerous millionaires, it is said that he refused to supply one crowned head because he disapproved of His Majesty's table manners.

Of the seven, four are now on permanent exhibition in museums, one is in private ownership (thought to be that of a Swiss millionaire), and one is owned by the relatively prosaic marque of Volkswagen, who now also own the rights to the Bugatti name itself. The seventh went missing in mysterious circumstances which this narrative may perhaps seek to explain.

While the cars themselves proved an expensive flop (Bugatti had planned on selling at least twenty) the overall project became a great commercial success as it was discovered that the cars' great engines could be used to power railway locomotives, and nearly two hundred were bought for this purpose by the French railways, the locomotives remaining in service until the late 1950s. Since one of these was officially clocked at an *average* speed of 122 miles an hour *while pulling a train*, the effect of driving a car similarly powered, but with 1920s brakes and steering, and without a train to encumber it, is perhaps better imagined than experienced. Surely Major Flint cannot have been alone in finding it a challenging task.

Throughout the book there are passing references to certain other artistic works. Each is intended by way of what is now in America called an 'homage' (pronounced, naturally, in an affected French manner), in other words an affectionate and respectful nod, carrying comforting overtones of nostalgia and massive intellectual superiority. In the hope that the writer may be reckoned to be just as affected and superior as the next pretentious intellectual, astute readers may spot such nods to the likes of Frank Richards, Sapper, E.M. Forster, Clive James, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Daphne du Maurier. However, no prize is offered for correctly identifying these, other than the natural comfort of knowing that, compared with you, your family and friends are irredeemably ill-read.

Certain liberties have been taken with the plot and locations of Manzoni's classic *I promessi sposi*, which are in truth much more complex ('tarsome'?) than would have been convenient, but the truth is fundamentally as stated.

While on the subject of other works, habitués of the internet will hopefully have come across the Mapp and Lucia Glossary, tirelessly maintained by Deryck Solomon and an invaluable ready-reference tool, which the writer has plundered shamelessly.

Bellagio is a real place, and quite as delightful in the flesh as it is here described. The hotel is similarly painted from life, though disguised with a different name. The writer has stayed there, yes, and danced an Argentinian tango to its piano trio too.

Turkish cigarettes were once in common use, at least outside the United States, where the good old no-nonsense domestic Virginia tobacco always enjoyed a near-monopoly, but though polite society would indeed have had their cigarettes handmade to their own specifications, few would have been as exotic as those used by Francesco. Devotees of period fiction will know that it was considered good form to have both in one's cigarette case when offering it to a third party ('Fancy a gasper? Turkish on the right, Virginia on the left.'). However, by the time our story takes place (whenever that may be) Turkish cigarettes have been almost completely supplanted by Virginia, partly on grounds of cost, and have come to have a very louche image indeed, the word 'gasper' now being employed to mean specifically a Virginia cigarette as opposed to one of those nasty, effete, foreign jobbies, which are chiefly reserved for Armenian art dealers, Russian emigré ballet dancers, and the more culturally pretentious residents of Hampstead and Bloomsbury.

Those unversed in the history of horticulture may be mystified by Lucia's reference to John Transcendent. Come to that, so might horticultural experts. It is likely that she actually had in mind John Tradescant, who designed the gardens at Hatfield House.

Mapp's grasp of the French language is of course either legendary or infamous, depending on your viewpoint. Even having made allowances for her not knowing that '*cracher*' is 'to spit' rather than 'to crash', and that '*rognons*' are kidneys rather than onions, what are we to make of '*tout égout*'? It is likely that what the dear lady really meant was '*tout*

égal', as in '*c'est tout égal à moi*' (it's all the same to me), whereas '*égout*' is of course a sewer. Her unfortunate substitution for '*carte blanche*' (full discretion) is explained in the text. There again, it is possible that Mapp is deliberately avoiding being heard to speak French well for fear of being accused of having had a grammar-school education.

For the financially curious, Lucia's description of fractional reserve banking is perfectly accurate (as indeed is her grasp of a control premium). Nor were she and Brabazon Lodge alone in assuming that a situation could never arise in which all the depositors of a bank would ask for their money back at the same time. Readers will be happy to know that fractional reserve banking is alive and well, having survived the Wall Street Crash and been practised subsequently by every bank in the world, including Lehman Brothers and Northern Rock.

Incidentally, Brabazon, apart from being the name of one of many ill-fated projects launched by the British aircraft industry in heroic defiance of commercial logic, was one of the various names, both real and assumed, used by the British writer James Hadley Chase, best known for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *No Orchids For Miss Blandish*.

Finally, there really is a vintage Bugatti at the bottom of Lake Como. It was dumped there by an irate Italian businessman as a protest when it was about to be confiscated and auctioned for unpaid taxes, thus proving the old proverb that you can do what you like to an Italian's wife, provided both of you exercise all proper discretion, but that if you wish your various body parts to remain properly connected to each other then you should keep your hands off his daughter, his mistress, and his car.

Chapter 1

Emmeline Pillson, known universally as 'Lucia' in honour of her late Italophile husband, Philip ('Pepino') Lucas, was staring at the financial pages of her newspaper so intently that she entirely failed to notice when her current husband entered the room and sat down opposite her at the breakfast table. It was only when he greeted her with a diffident 'Good morning, Lucia' that she looked up and acknowledged his presence with something of a start.

'Oh, good morning, Georgie,' she replied. 'I'm so sorry, my dear, I didn't hear you come in.'

She seemed in two minds whether to continue with her newspaper or lay it down. After a few seconds' wavering she chose the latter course – in consequence, she would doubtless have pointed out had anybody enquired, of her marital responsibility to engage her husband in conversation. Had anybody asked Georgie, he would have suggested that it may have had rather more to do with the smell of the fresh toast which Grosvenor had just placed before them. It was as well, therefore, that no third party was in fact present to raise any such issue, since Georgie's explanation would have caused Lucia to stare at him coldly and silently over her reading glasses before saying in a voice of stone, 'Whatever the case, Georgie, I *did* put it down.'

The sort of tone, in fact, which she had used on so many occasions in the old days back in Riseholme, to quell the occasional dissident element in her kingdom (not for nothing was she known as 'Queen Lucia') or to ensure the smooth running of the many Elizabethan

pageants which only she could possibly organise, despite her well-worn protest of 'How you all work me so'. Naturally for such events there could be no other conceivable candidate to play the role of the great Elizabeth herself. Indeed there had been one celebrated occasion when she had scathingly told the local fishmonger, masquerading as a sixteenth-century royal adviser, '*Must* is not a word to be used to princes, little man,' with such majestic menace that a halberdier had dropped his weapon with a dreadful crash, and two turnspits had fallen clean off the stern of the *Golden Hind*. Georgie, though he was standing fully ten feet away, had felt a cold hand clutch at his vitals, and poor Daisy Quantock had let out an involuntary screech of terror which she had tried to camouflage by pointing at the luckless turnspits, by now splashing disconsolately in the village pond.

It was a tone of voice which had already seen her through one term of office as mayor of Tilling and, it was rumoured, would shortly secure her a second. It had been used to good effect on those Tillingites who had dared to doubt her claim to have entertained a Duchess to dinner, and on many occasions on recalcitrant workmen when their plans for a tea break had clashed with her own idea of a proper working schedule. It was one of many weapons in Lucia's considerable armoury, all designed and kept properly oiled and sharpened for one purpose only: to get her own way no matter how difficult the circumstances might seem, and no matter how insuperable the obstacles that might be placed in her way. Truly, Lucia was the irresistible force for which no immovable object seemed to exist.

Only once had the irresistible force met its match, during the celebrated Tilling mayoral lectures, which she had inaugurated. Mr Noel Coward had been sufficiently ill-bred as to refuse five separate invitations addressed to him in her own fair hand to come and lecture the intellectual cream of Tilling on the technique of the modern stage. 'Really!' Lucia had finally commented in exasperation. 'You would think the man would jump at an opportunity to become better known.'

However, the irresistible force had simply eddied and flowed around

the immovable object, as irresistible forces are wont to do, and had substituted members of the Tilling Society as lecturers. Lucia herself had naturally spoken on Shakespeare, on which subject she was a self-proclaimed expert, culminating in a performance of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene of a dramatic intensity that would surely have been instantly acclaimed by John Gielgud or Herbert Marshall, had either gentleman been able to accept her invitation to attend.

Major Benjamin Flint, now officially Mapp-Flint since his marriage to the redoubtable Elizabeth Mapp but known widely as Major Benjy, had equally naturally spoken on tiger-shooting, and in a finale no less gripping then Lucia's sleepwalking scene had demonstrated how he had once hit a tiger smartly across the nose with his riding crop before seizing his trusty Mauser to despatch the beast with a single shot. Actually firing the Mauser had perhaps been taking verisimilitude too far, but a collection was taken up for the broken window, and everyone agreed afterwards that in all the several dozen times they had heard the Major's tiger stories, never had they been rendered better.

Irene Coles had been enlisted to talk about modern painting, while Mr Bartlett the vicar (known as 'Padre') was asked to speak on the Power of Free Will and the Origins of Evil, but he got rather mixed up and talked about the Power of Evil instead. Diva Plaistow spoke on cake-making, Mr Wyse on social etiquette, and Georgie on the techniques of needlepoint. Only Elizabeth Mapp-Flint had not been called upon since, as Lucia innocently explained, she was unable to think of a single subject on which dear Elizabeth might possibly have anything of interest to say.

For the moment, the irresistible force was spreading marmalade on a piece of toast with a slightly distracted air.

'Do you know, Georgie,' she purred contentedly, 'moving my money into shares from those boring old bonds was the best decision I ever took.'

'Really?' asked Georgie, not because he was truly interested but rather because some sort of response was clearly expected of him. Georgie's

mother had held very firm views about speculation, claiming it to be a short cut to the workhouse, and he had never really approved of Lucia's forays into South African goldfields and American motor manufacturers. His own money was held, as it had always been, in British government bonds.

'Georgie!' Lucia said more sharply, as though aware that he was not really paying attention. 'Do you have any idea how much profit I have made so far this year? I was just totting it up in my head when you came in.'

'I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea,' he replied vaguely, reaching for the teapot.

'Eight thousand pounds!' cried Lucia triumphantly.

Gratifyingly, this had the intended effect. Georgie's hand remained suspended in mid-air and his jaw dropped a good inch. After a few seconds his mouth started to open and close and he formed the words 'eight thousand pounds' soundlessly a few times as though he was working them around on his tongue to see if he enjoyed their taste. Lucia arched her eyebrows and waited for him to recover the power of speech.

'But that is a simply enormous amount of money,' he gasped at last. He remembered from the days of Lucia and Elizabeth Mapp (as she then was) being presumed lost at sea that it was exactly the amount that Major Flint had been told to expect as the value of Miss Mapp's entire estate. So in the space of a mere six months the gains on Lucia's share portfolio had been equivalent to Mapp's total worldly worth, grimly husbanded and, where possible, augmented over several generations.

'Yes, isn't it?' said Lucia delightedly. 'It's a gain of ten per cent, but as it's only over half a year then I suppose that really means twenty per cent. What do you think, Georgie? That must be right, mustn't it?'

Georgie's mind seemed to be elsewhere, however. He was performing some rapid mental arithmetic based on his recollection that at much the same time as Major Flint had been told to expect eight thousand pounds, he himself had been warned to expect ten times

that amount. He remembered the Major's involuntary ejaculation of 'Congratulations!' before he had realised that such sentiments may not be deemed in the best of taste.

'Hang on, do you mean to say that you have put *all* your money into shares?' he cried in horror. 'Oh really, Lucia, how could you? It's too bad of you. Very irresponsible, I must say. Tut, tut!'

'Oh, fie to your 'tut, tut', Georgie,' came the spirited response. 'Fie and pish and tush and … whatever else you care to,' she finished, slightly lamely. 'Eight thousand pounds is eight thousand pounds.'

'Well, there's no arguing with that,' agreed Georgie, 'but suppose you were to lose eight thousand pounds instead – you could just as easily, you know.'

'Fiddlesticks!' snapped Lucia. 'Where is your sense of adventure, Georgie? Where is your *courage*?'

As she uttered the last word, Lucia's voice dropped an octave and gave off a dramatic vibrato. Georgie groaned inwardly as he saw a distinctly Elizabethan glint come into her eyes. He knew what was coming next: a quotation. He was not to be disappointed.

'Does Shakespeare not say …' She paused for dramatic effect, squared her shoulders and drew a deep breath, as was only proper when quoting the immortal bard; it was perhaps the literary equivalent of her Beethoven face.

'Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid. Neither be thou dismayed.'

Being quoted at by Lucia could be a disturbing experience, as the Riseholme fishmonger could well attest. She did so in the best dramatic tradition, albeit the dramatic tradition of a bygone age now happily departed. Her eyes flashed and her chest heaved, and she frequently crumpled slightly at the end as though to indicate the emotional effort which she had put into the phrase, leaving herself spiritually spent.

As she dropped her head to allow the unfathomably deep feelings which Shakespeare always aroused in her to drain away, she doubtless

felt that she had carried all before her, and that there would be no more carping from her hopelessly defeated consort. In this she was to be disappointed, as Georgie reached for the milk jug and said quietly, 'It's the Bible actually.'

'Oh, Georgie,' Lucia reproached him briskly, 'I think I can be trusted to know my Shakespeare. All those wonderful, wonderful hours in my Elizabethan garden in dear old Riseholme – how I miss it so.'

'And I know my Bible,' retorted Georgie, who was clearly not in a mood for surrender this early in the day. 'I think you'll find it's Joshua and I'm pretty sure it goes on 'for the Lord thy God is with thee', and it would hardly do that if it was Shakespeare now, would it?'

'Ah, but that exquisite Elizabethan prose,' Lucia said dreamily. 'What a natural mistake for me to make.'

'Jacobean, actually,' muttered Georgie, but Lucia chose not to hear that.

'And, of course, as Dante would have said …'

Lucia paused and gazed soulfully at the ceiling, but when she looked down again found that Georgie had fixed her with a stern stare. They both knew this was taking things a step too far.

'Don't for goodness sake start pretending to speak Italian again,' he said sharply. 'Remember what a mess you got into when Olga sat you next to *signor* Cortese at dinner and all you could do was to go on repeating the same two lines of Dante over and over again. Really, Lucia, I would have thought that your blood would run cold at the very thought.'

'Georgino,' Lucia said reprovingly and then pouted, a sure sign that she was about to lapse into the baby-talk which was her final resort when Georgie's defences remained unbreached.

'Is oo cwoss wiv ickle me?'

Major Benjamin Flint, now the husband of the said Elizabeth Mapp, had once involuntarily witnessed Lucia employing this mode of speech and had felt a strong impulse to be suddenly a long way away, and preferably in close proximity to a well-charged glass of something

restorative. The hideous thought had flashed through his head that his own wife might one day choose to employ such gross tactics upon himself. This had however been closely followed by a strong feeling of sympathy for Pillson, who perhaps wasn't such a bad fellow after all. A trifle strange perhaps, with his wig and his embroidery and his effeminate ways, but when it came to matrimony it could not be overlooked that he was a fellow-sufferer.

Ickle me knew her man, however. Georgie was genuinely devoted to Lucia and was rarely able to resist this ultimate fatal appeal to his sentimental instincts. However, on this occasion he resolved to be firm.

'Yes, Lucia,' he said. 'If you must know, I'm very vexed with you. It's all very well this speculating of yours, and I own you've proved very good at it, just as you seem to be very good at everything you attempt, but please just stop and consider for a minute what could happen if anything went wrong.'

This sugar-coated flattery was the only way in which criticism could ever be countenanced (though not actually accepted – that would be going too far) by Lucia, and she paused for thought.

'Well, Georgie,' she replied, thankfully in her normal voice, 'if it really makes you unhappy then of course I will think about what you say, but I simply cannot see what you're so worried about.'

'Oh honestly, Lucia, surely you've got enough money already? Even after you've bought every piece of new equipment under the sun for the hospital, and a new roller for the cricket club, and a new cup for the golf club, and goodness knows what else, you know very well that you've got oodles of money. Now just think for a moment what would happen if you lost it. We couldn't afford to live here in Mallards on my money, you know. We'd have to sell up, and let Grosvenor and Cadman go, and move to a little cottage – and you wouldn't like that, would you?'

Lucia gave the matter a moment's reflection and realised that no, she would not like that one little bit.

'Isn't that just like you, Georgino,' she cooed, 'thinking of me

all the time. Do not worry, *caro mio. Non dimenticare*.' She gave a declamatory ring to the Italian words.

'I don't think that's right, actually,' he said as he poured himself another cup of tea. '*Dimenticare* means "forget", I'm pretty sure.'

'Georgie,' said Lucia, ignoring his comment completely, 'I've had an idea.'

Lucia's ideas were not like those of other people – ordinary, normal, everyday people who walked the streets and did their shopping and came home to have tea in their carpet slippers. Lucia's ideas were grandiose affairs on a par with the building projects of a renaissance pope, or the conquest of a new province by a Roman emperor. The more brightly she smiled when unveiling the idea, the more magnificent and ambitious a conception it was likely to be, and she was smiling very brightly right now, as Georgie noticed to his alarm.

Lucia's ideas were rarely to his liking. They usually envisaged her being swept along in a chariot receiving the adulation of cheering crowds, but every triumph requires a supporting cast, and Georgie invariably featured prominently among these serried ranks of spear-carriers. When Lucia mounted her famous pageant in Riseholme, Georgie had to stand around dressed as Sir Francis Drake, waving his hat and shouting 'Hurrah' every so often while Lucia delivered page after page of Elizabethan oratory in between changing into three different outfits. When Lucia wanted to endow a new organ for the church, and play it at its introductory service, it was Georgie who had to sit beside her, play the pedals and then slip away discreetly into the background while she received the acclaim which she naturally felt to be her due. When Lucia decided to dig for Roman remains in the back garden, it was Georgie who actually had to spend hours down the hole giving himself blisters and backache while Lucia sat in state in the Garden Room reading her encyclopaedia, giving interviews to the press, and urging him on to greater efforts.

'Oh yes?' he said, warily.

'We shall take a holiday!' she enthused. 'A change of air, Georgie, a

change of scene, why it will buck you up enormously. You were only saying yesterday how peaky you've been feeling lately.'

'Well, that's true, certainly,' mused Georgie, an enthusiastic hypochondriac who was cursed by robust good health. 'But, Lucia, surely you haven't forgotten that we *are* going on holiday in a few weeks' time? I've been looking forward to it.'

'Oh, that!' said Lucia dismissively.

'I don't call two weeks at the Grand in Brighton "that",' came Georgie's rejoinder. 'It's jolly expensive, as you well know, and worth every penny. I intend to pamper myself outrageously. I've ordered a new outfit specially – I do hope you like it.'

'No, *caro mio*,' cried Lucia, on fire with frustration that Georgie had not caught her drift. 'I mean a *real* holiday. The south of France, Salzburg, Vienna, wherever you like.'

'Italy?' breathed Georgie.

'Italy!' she repeated. 'Yes, of course, Georgie. That should have been at the top of my list.'

They both gazed at each other in rapt silence. Though they affected to speak Italian to each other, and Lucia gave somewhat laborious lessons on Dante to local ladies, they had actually been to Italy just once, on holiday a few years previously. In the case of Lucia's Dante lessons, this was not a practical drawback since she prepared them from an English translation which she kept tucked away in her bedroom. In any event, these academic labours occurred but rarely. In the first place it was difficult to gather together three or four ladies who had not already been forewarned by those who had attended previous such events. In the second, the class tended to dwindle away to nothing after the first lesson owing to sudden dental appointments, summer colds, domestic crises or even unexpected family bereavements. Thus Lucia's mental grasp of thirteenth-century Italian had never been seriously tested beyond the first eight lines or so of the *Inferno*. Her place as Tilling's foremost authority on The Supreme Poet was nonetheless unchallenged, though Mr Wyse had once so far forgotten himself as

to raise his eyebrows when Lucia, asked why Dante's greatest work was called *The Divine Comedy*, had held forth at some length on the poet's use of humour.

Their love of Italy, and all things Italian, was quite genuine. Yet their 'Italy' was not the area which appears on maps of Europe stretching out into the Mediterranean like a big, bullying boot kicking poor little Sicily. Rather, theirs was an enchanted land of poets and artists and musicians which they could, and did, quite easily inhabit without leaving Tilling. Indeed, on the one occasion when they had actually visited Italy unwelcome reality had threatened to intrude on a number of occasions in the shape of primitive plumbing arrangements, chronic stomach upsets, food heavily laced with garlic, myriad beggars, and all sorts of disgraceful foreign behaviour. One day in Florence an Italian had even had the temerity to pinch Lucia's bottom on the Ponte Vecchio. This was naturally not an experience which she had shared with anyone else, but the memory of it haunted her still.

Though they may both have chosen to forget it, the trip had disclosed something else as well. While they shared a vision of Italy which was idealistic rather than grounded in solid, empirical observation, they had rather different views on how best to enjoy it. For Lucia, Italy meant getting up at first light, performing her calisthenics on the balcony, eating a frugal breakfast, and then heading off for the first museum of the day, notebook and pencil in hand. Georgie, in the neighbouring room, would be greatly disturbed by the sound of Lucia shouting '*uno*, *due*, *tre*' as she bounced up and down enthusiastically, and burrow under the bedclothes, dreading the knock on his door which would shortly summon him to join her on her first cultural mission of the day.

Georgie probably had a greater true feeling for art than his wife, and was certainly much better read, but he found the prospect of traipsing round interminable museums in the growing heat of the day for hours on end too much of a good thing. Before long his feet were hurting from the new shoes, of purest faun buckskin, which he had

bought specially for the trip but which pinched his toes abominably, and he was several rooms ahead of his spouse, who was by now waving her lorgnette and talking in a loud voice to anyone who would listen about the patina, and Michelangelo's use of *chiaroscuro*. Italy for him conjured up visions of himself in an immaculately tailored summer suit sitting in a shady corner of an elegant terrace sipping a heavily watered gin and it, and occasionally standing up to raise his hat to any particularly interesting-looking people who might wander past. However, in the full flush of one of Lucia's ideas, such trifling practical matters were of little consequence.

Much as the Mapp-Flints' marriage had been saved, if truth be told, by their unexpected discovery of a box marked 'Monopoly' on the top of a wardrobe in their hotel bedroom, so the Pillsons' holiday had been dramatically improved by a prolonged attack of enteritis which claimed first Georgie and then Lucia in turn, confining one or both to their respective rooms for days on end. For Georgie, this had in fact been one of the highlights of the trip. Genuinely ill for once and visited daily by a doctor for a lengthy discussion of his symptoms, he had amassed a most satisfying collection of pills and potions on his bedroom table, and in the days of convalescence which followed would sit on the terrace and allow a nice young waiter to tuck a blanket around his legs, after which he would sit with a piece of embroidery in his lap, apologising to anyone who enquired that he was much too weak to rise to greet them.

'Well,' he said, 'where should we go?'

'Anywhere you like, Georgie,' replied Lucia, still entranced with having had the idea in the first place. 'You must choose everything and make all the arrangements. This shall be like a present from me to you. Like that time I sent you to stay in that gorgeous hotel in Folkestone with Cadman and Foljambe – do you remember?'

Georgie remembered all too well, and could not help thinking that this was not very good tactics on Lucia's part. He had not so much been going on holiday as scuttling away from Tilling with his tail between his legs after Lucia, once again, had got them both into a very

tiresome situation by being over-liberal with her supposed command of Italian. It had transpired that Mr Wyse's sister was an Italian countess, and he had let it be known that he was so looking forward to hearing her and Lucia prattle away fluently during the countess's forthcoming visit. So Georgie had been packed off to Folkestone, where he had spent a pleasant week wandering around in a blazer and yachting cap and watching the steamer come in and go out again, while Lucia had been attacked by a virulent strain of influenza and had confined herself to bed. It had been a clever scheme, spoiled only by Miss Mapp, as she then was, spying on Lucia from the top of the church tower and seeing her performing her exercises in rude health in the garden at Mallards. However, this was no time to be churlish, and he shook off the thought.

'Oh, how frightfully diffy!' he murmured, teetering on the brink of lapsing into baby-talk himself. 'I would so love to go to Venice, but then there's Rome, and Florence, and San Remo and all sorts of other places as well.'

'Why, Georgie, what a silly boy you are,' said Lucia at once, her eyes wide with astonishment that Georgie should not have grasped instantly the full grandeur of her plans. Yet the fact was not entirely unwelcome. This would surely teach him once and for all to show the proper level of enthusiasm for her occasional but regular flashes of genius. 'You can go anywhere and everywhere. Don't you see? That's my idea.'

'You don't mean …?' Georgie gasped.

'I most certainly do,' averred Lucia. 'Why, it's perfect, Georgie. You said yourself that I didn't really need the money, and as it's just come to me out of nowhere, so to speak, I shall cash in eight thousand pounds of shares and spend the lot on the holiday of a lifetime.'

Once again Georgie's mouth started opening and shutting. Rather like a goldfish, Lucia thought mischievously, and so she pressed on without waiting for a response.

'There, then, that's all settled. We shall leave at the beginning of

July, and you must choose exactly where you would like to go Georgie, and make all the arrangements of course. Perhaps you could go up to London and do some research in the library at the British Museum, and then go and see someone like Thomas Cook's? Stay the night if you like and go to a concert, or the opera or something.'

'The opera!' cried Georgie. 'Olga!'

Lucia frowned and gazed out of the window. This was hardly the response she had expected to her generous bombshell. Had Georgie possessed an ounce of sensitivity, appreciation or even common courtesy he would have spent at least the next ten minutes exclaiming at her uncommon altruism before seizing a shopping basket to venture forth and spread the tidings amongst Tilling's finest. Instead, his mind was already running in the direction of a meeting with that Bracely woman.

'But why don't you come too, Lucia?' asked Georgie, emerging (with a guilty start, doubtless, thought Lucia) from his little reverie. 'I'm sure Olga would be delighted to see you.'

'Too kind, Georgie,' replied Lucia in that wonderful distracted way she had when she wanted to express severe disappointment with her interlocutor, 'but of course I have far too much to attend to here.' She waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the piano, the desk and her embossed stationery while she waited for Georgie to press his case and overwhelm her understandable reluctance. Alas, she waited in vain.

'Oh well, that's settled then,' murmured Georgie contentedly as he went in search of the railway timetable.

By the time he had settled his travel arrangements and held what Lucia could only describe as a very loud, indeed raucous, telephone conversation with Olga, there was little time left for him to change into a much more splendid outfit and head off to the station at a discreet trot clutching a Gladstone bag hastily packed by Foljambe, and showing, if not a fine turn of speed, at least a fine flash of lavender spats.

By the time he had settled into his carriage and decided which of his magazines to read first, Lucia had swept grimly into action, despatching one telegram to her stockbroker, Mr Mammoncash, instructing him

to liquidate eight thousand pounds' worth of shares and remit the same to her bankers, and a second to the Grand Hotel in Brighton informing them that they would not after all be experiencing the pleasure of her company as originally arranged.

By the time all this had transpired it was long past the time when Tilling society traditionally gathered in the cobbled streets of the old town and discussed the great issues of the day. Since Georgie had failed so completely in his duties to spread the news of their impending Grand Tour, Lucia had little choice but to send Cadman out with notes inviting both Diva Plaistow and Evie Bartlett to tea, during the course of which she was able to impart these momentous tidings, having first abjured them both to the strictest confidentiality.

As they left Mallards later that afternoon Lucia explained, with great delicacy, that she would be most unhappy if word of her Italian venture was to leak out, since she had no wish to embarrass or upset Elizabeth Mapp-Flint, who had been in the habit of going with her husband, Major Benjy, to stay with some obscure cousins in Worthing. However, on the last such occasion they had arrived only to find that the said cousins had quite inexplicably moved away leaving no forwarding address, and thus the Mapp-Flints now typically took no summer holiday at all. Each lady swore a solemn oath eternally to respect the secrecy of Lucia's holiday plans. The latter retired happily to her garden room for a small glass of medium sherry, content that the secret would be common knowledge in the living rooms of Tilling within the hour.