Miss Mapp

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PREFACE

I lingered at the window of the garden-room from which Miss Mapp so often and so ominously looked forth. To the left was the front of her house, straight ahead the steep cobbled way, with a glimpse of the High Street at the end, to the right the crooked chimney and the church.

The street was populous with passengers, but search as I might, I could see none who ever so remotely resembled the objects of her vigilance.

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Lamb House, Rye.

Printed in Great Britain.

CHAPTER I

Miss Elizabeth Mapp might have been forty, and she had taken advantage of this opportunity by being just a year or two older. Her face was of high vivid colour and was corrugated by chronic rage and curiosity; but these vivifying emotions had preserved to her an astonishing activity of mind and body, which fully accounted for the comparative adolescence with which she would have been credited anywhere except in the charming little town which she had inhabited so long. Anger and the gravest suspicions about everybody had kept her young and on the boil.

She sat, on this hot July morning, like a large bird of prey at the very convenient window of her garden-room, the ample bow of which formed a strategical point of high value. This garden-room, solid and spacious, was built at right angles to the front of her house, and looked straight down the very interesting street which debouched at its lower end into the High Street of Tilling. Exactly opposite her front door the road turned sharply, so that as she looked out from this projecting window, her own house was at right angles on her left, the street in question plunged steeply downwards in front of her, and to her right she commanded an uninterrupted view of its further course which terminated in the disused graveyard surrounding the big Norman church. Anything of interest about the church, however, could be gleaned from a guide-book, and Miss Mapp did not occupy herself much with such coldly venerable topics. Far more to her mind was the fact that between the church and her strategic window was the cottage in which her gardener lived, and she could thus see, when not otherwise engaged, whether he went home before twelve, or failed to get back to her garden again by one, for he had to cross the street in front of her very eyes. Similarly she could observe whether any of his abandoned family ever came out from her garden door weighted with suspicious baskets, which might contain smuggled vegetables. Only yesterday morning she had hurried forth with a dangerous smile to intercept a laden urchin, with inquiries as to what was in "that nice basket." On

that occasion that nice basket had proved to contain a strawberry net which was being sent for repair to the gardener's wife; so there was nothing more to be done except verify its return. This she did from a side window of the garden-room which commanded the strawberry beds; she could sit quite close to that, for it was screened by the large-leaved branches of a fig-tree and she could spy unseen.

Otherwise this road to the right leading up to the church was of no great importance (except on Sunday morning, when she could get a practically complete list of those who attended Divine Service), for no one of real interest lived in the humble dwellings which lined it. To the left was the front of her own house at right angles to the strategic window, and with regard to that a good many useful observations might be, and were, made. She could, from behind a curtain negligently half-drawn across the side of the window nearest the house, have an eye on her housemaid at work, and notice if she leaned out of a window, or made remarks to a friend passing in the street, or waved salutations with a duster. Swift upon such discoveries, she would execute a flank march across the few steps of garden and steal into the house, noiselessly ascend the stairs, and catch the offender red-handed at this public dalliance. But all such domestic espionage to right and left was flavourless and insipid compared to the tremendous discoveries which daily and hourly awaited the trained observer of the street that lay directly in front of her window.

There was little that concerned the social movements of Tilling that could not be proved, or at least reasonably conjectured, from Miss Mapp's eyrie. Just below her house on the left stood Major Flint's residence, of Georgian red brick like her own, and opposite was that of Captain Puffin. They were both bachelors, though Major Flint was generally supposed to have been the hero of some amazingly amorous adventures in early life, and always turned the subject with great abruptness when anything connected with duelling was mentioned. It was not, therefore, unreasonable to infer that he had had experiences of a bloody sort, and colour was added to this romantic conjecture by the fact that in damp, rheumatic weather his left arm was very stiff, and he had been known to say that his wound troubled him. What wound that

was no one exactly knew (it might have been anything from a vaccination mark to a sabre-cut), for having said that his wound troubled him, he would invariably add: "Pshaw! that's enough about an old campaigner"; and though he might subsequently talk of nothing else except the old campaigner, he drew a veil over his old campaigns. That he had seen service in India was, indeed, probable by his referring to lunch as tiffin, and calling to his parlour-maid with the ejaculation of "Qui-hi." As her name was Sarah, this was clearly a reminiscence of days in bungalows. When not in a rage, his manner to his own sex was bluff and hearty; but whether in a rage or not, his manner to the fairies, or lovely women, was gallant and pompous in the extreme. He certainly had a lock of hair in a small gold specimen case on his watch-chain, and had been seen to kiss it when, rather carelessly, he thought that he was unobserved.

Miss Mapp's eye, as she took her seat in her window on this sunny July morning, lingered for a moment on the Major's house, before she proceeded to give a disgusted glance at the pictures on the back page of her morning illustrated paper, which chiefly represented young women dancing in rings in the surf, or lying on the beach in attitudes which Miss Mapp would have scorned to adjust herself to. Neither the Major nor Captain Puffin were very early risers, but it was about time that the first signals of animation might be expected. Indeed, at this moment, she quite distinctly heard that muffled roar which to her experienced ear was easily interpreted to be "Qui-hi!"

"So the Major has just come down to breakfast," she mechanically inferred, "and it's close on ten o'clock. Let me see: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday—Porridge morning."

Her penetrating glance shifted to the house exactly opposite to that in which it was porridge morning, and even as she looked a hand was thrust out of a small upper window and deposited a sponge on the sill. Then from the inside the lower sash was thrust firmly down, so as to prevent the sponge from blowing away and falling into the street. Captain Puffin, it was therefore clear, was a little later than the Major that morning. But he always shaved and brushed his teeth before his bath, so that there was but a few minutes between them.

General manœuvres in Tilling, the gradual burstings of fluttering life from the chrysalis of the night, the emergence of the ladies of the town with their wicker-baskets in their hands for housekeeping purchases, the exodus of men to catch the 11.20 a.m. steam-tram out to the golf links, and other first steps in the duties and diversions of the day, did not get into full swing till half-past ten, and Miss Mapp had ample time to skim the headlines of her paper and indulge in chaste meditations about the occupants of these two houses, before she need really make herself alert to miss nothing. Of the two, Major Flint, without doubt, was the more attractive to the feminine sense; for years Miss Mapp had tried to cajole him into marrying her, and had not nearly finished yet. With his record of adventure, with the romantic reek of India (and camphor) in the tiger-skin of the rugs that strewed his hall and surged like a rising tide up the wall, with his haughty and gallant manner, with his loud pshawings and sniffs at "nonsense and balderdash," his thumpings on the table to emphasize an argument, with his wound and his prodigious swipes at golf, his intolerance of any who believed in ghosts, microbes or vegetarianism, there was something dashing and risky about him; you felt that you were in the presence of some hot coal straight from the furnace of creation. Captain Puffin, on the other hand, was of clay so different that he could hardly be considered to be made of clay at all. He was lame and short and meagre, with strings of peaceful beads and Papuan aprons in his hall instead of wild tiger-skins, and had a jerky, inattentive manner and a high pitched voice. Yet to Miss Mapp's mind there was something behind his unimpressiveness that had a mysterious quality—all the more so, because nothing of it appeared on the surface. Nobody could call Major Flint, with his bawlings and his sniffings, the least mysterious. He laid all his loud cards on the table, great hulking kings and aces. But Miss Mapp felt far from sure that Captain Puffin did not hold a joker which would some time come to light. The idea of being Mrs. Puffin was not so attractive as the other, but she occasionally gave it her remote consideration.

Yet there was mystery about them both, in spite of the fact that most of their movements were so amply accounted for. As a rule, they played golf together in the morning, reposed in the afternoon, as could easily be verified by anyone standing on a still day in the road between their houses and listening to the loud and rhythmical breathings that fanned the tranquil air, certainly went out to tea-parties afterwards and played

bridge till dinner-time; or if no such entertainment was proffered them, occupied arm-chairs at the country club, or laboriously amassed a hundred at billiards. Though tea-parties were profuse, dining out was very rare at Tilling; Patience or a jig-saw puzzle occupied the hour or two that intervened between domestic supper and bed-time; but again and again, Miss Mapp had seen lights burning in the sitting-room of those two neighbours at an hour when such lights as were still in evidence at Tilling were strictly confined to bedrooms, and should, indeed, have been extinguished there. And only last week, being plucked from slumber by some unaccountable indigestion (for which she blamed a small green apple), she had seen at no less than twelve-thirty in the morning the lights in Captain Puffin's sitting-room still shining through the blind. This had excited her so much that at risk of toppling into the street, she had craned her neck from her window, and observed a similar illumination in the house of Major Flint. They were not together then, for in that case any prudent householder (and God knew that they both of them scraped and saved enough, or, if He didn't know, Miss Mapp did) would have quenched his own lights, if he were talking to his friend in his friend's house. The next night, the pangs of indigestion having completely vanished, she set her alarum clock at the same timeless hour, and had observed exactly the same phenomenon. Such late hours, of course, amply accounted for these late breakfasts; but why, so Miss Mapp pithily asked herself, why these late hours? Of course they both kept summer-time, whereas most of Tilling utterly refused (except when going by train) to alter their watches because Mr. Lloyd George told them to; but even allowing for that ... then she perceived that summer-time made it later than ever for its adherents, so that was no excuse.

Miss Mapp had a mind that was incapable of believing the improbable, and the current explanation of these late hours was very improbable, indeed. Major Flint often told the world in general that he was revising his diaries, and that the only uninterrupted time which he could find in this pleasant whirl of life at Tilling was when he was alone

in the evening. Captain Puffin, on his part, confessed to a student's curiosity about the ancient history of Tilling, with regard to which he was preparing a monograph. He could talk, when permitted, by the hour about the reclamation from the sea of the marsh land south of the town, and about the old Roman road which was built on a raised causeway, of which traces remained; but it argued, so thought Miss Mapp, an unprecedented egoism on the part of Major Flint, and an equally unprecedented love of antiquities on the part of Captain Puffin, that they should prosecute their studies (with gas at the present price) till such hours. No; Miss Mapp knew better than that, but she had not made up her mind exactly what it was that she knew. She mentally rejected the idea that egoism (even in these days of diaries and autobiographies) and antiquities accounted for so much study, with the same healthy intolerance with which a vigorous stomach rejects unwholesome food, and did not allow herself to be insidiously poisoned by its retention. But as she took up her light aluminium opera-glasses to make sure whether it was Isabel Poppit or not who was now stepping with that high, prancing tread into the stationer's in the High Street, she exclaimed to herself, for the three hundred and sixty-fifth time after breakfast: "It's very baffling"; for it was precisely a year to-day since she had first seen those mysterious midnight squares of illuminated blind. "Baffling," in fact, was a word that constantly made short appearances in Miss Mapp's vocabulary, though its retention for a whole year over one subject was unprecedented. But never yet had "baffled" sullied her wells of pure undefiled English.

Movement had begun; Mrs. Plaistow, carrying her wicker basket, came round the corner by the church, in the direction of Miss Mapp's window, and as there was a temporary coolness between them (following violent heat) with regard to some worsted of brilliant rose-madder hue, which a forgetful draper had sold to Mrs. Plaistow, having definitely promised it to Miss Mapp ... but Miss Mapp's large-

mindedness scorned to recall the sordid details of this paltry appropriation. The heat had quite subsided, and Miss Mapp was, for her part, quite prepared to let the coolness regain the normal temperature of cordiality the moment that Mrs. Plaistow returned that worsted. Outwardly and publicly friendly relationships had been resumed, and as the coolness had lasted six weeks or so, it was probable that the worsted had already been incorporated into the ornamental border of Mrs. Plaistow's jumper or winter scarf, and a proper expression of regret would have to do instead. So the nearer Mrs. Plaistow approached, the more invisible she became to Miss Mapp's eye, and when she was within saluting distance had vanished altogether. Simultaneously Miss Poppit came out of the stationer's in the High Street.

Mrs. Plaistow turned the corner below Miss Mapp's window, and went bobbing along down the steep hill. She walked with the motion of those mechanical dolls sold in the street, which have three legs set as spokes to a circle, so that their feet emerge from their dress with Dutch and rigid regularity, and her figure had a certain squat rotundity that suited her gait. She distinctly looked into Captain Puffin's dining-room window as she passed, and with the misplaced juvenility so characteristic of her waggled her plump little hand at it. At the corner beyond Major Flint's house she hesitated a moment, and turned off down the entry into the side street where Mr. Wyse lived. The dentist lived there, too, and as Mr. Wyse was away on the continent of Europe, Mrs. Plaistow was almost certain to be visiting the other. Rapidly Miss Mapp remembered that at Mrs. Bartlett's bridge party yesterday Mrs. Plaistow had selected soft chocolates for consumption instead of those stuffed with nougat or almonds. That furnished additional evidence for the dentist, for generally you could not get a nougat chocolate at all if Godiva Plaistow had been in the room for more than a minute or two... As she crossed the narrow cobbled roadway, with the grass growing luxuriantly between the rounded pebbles, she stumbled and recovered herself with a swift little forward run, and the circular feet twinkled with the rapidity of those of a thrush scudding over the lawn.

By this time Isabel Poppit had advanced as far as the fish shop three doors below the turning down which Mrs. Plaistow had vanished. Her prancing progress paused there for a moment, and she waited with one knee highly elevated, like a statue of a curveting horse, before she finally decided to pass on. But she passed no further than the fruit shop next door, and took the three steps that elevated it from the street in a single prance, with her Roman nose high in the air. Presently she emerged, but with no obvious rotundity like that of a melon projecting from her basket, so that Miss Mapp could see exactly what she had purchased, and went back to the fish shop again. Surely she would not put fish on the top of fruit, and even as Miss Mapp's lucid intelligence rejected this supposition, the true solution struck her. "Ice," she said to herself, and, sure enough, projecting from the top of Miss Poppit's basket when she came out was an angular peak, wrapped up in paper already wet.

Miss Poppit came up the street and Miss Mapp put up her illustrated paper again, with the revolting picture of the Brighton sea-nymphs turned towards the window. Peeping out behind it, she observed that Miss Poppit's basket was apparently oozing with bright venous blood, and felt certain that she had bought red currants. That, coupled with the ice, made conjecture complete. She had bought red currants slightly damaged (or they would not have oozed so speedily), in order to make that iced red-currant fool of which she had so freely partaken at Miss Mapp's last bridge party. That was a very scurvy trick, for iced red-currant fool was an invention of Miss Mapp's, who, when it was praised, said that she inherited the recipe from her grandmother. But Miss Poppit had evidently entered the lists against Grandmamma Mapp, and she had as evidently guessed that quite inferior fruit—fruit that was distinctly "off," was undetectable when severely iced. Miss Mapp could only hope that the fruit in the basket now bobbing past her window was so much "off" that it had begun to ferment. Fermented red-currant fool was nasty to the taste, and, if persevered in, disastrous in its effects. General unpopularity might be needed to teach Miss Poppit not to trespass on Grandmamma Mapp's preserves.

Isabel Poppit lived with a flashy and condescending mother just round the corner beyond the gardener's cottage, and opposite the west

end of the church. They were comparatively new inhabitants of Tilling, having settled here only two or three years ago, and Tilling had not yet quite ceased to regard them as rather suspicious characters. Suspicion smouldered, though it blazed no longer. They were certainly rich, and Miss Mapp suspected them of being profiteers. They kept a butler, of whom they were both in considerable awe, who used almost to shrug his shoulders when Mrs. Poppit gave him an order: they kept a motor-car to which Mrs. Poppit was apt to allude more frequently than would have been natural if she had always been accustomed to one, and they went to Switzerland for a month every winter and to Scotland "for the shooting-season," as Mrs. Poppit terribly remarked, every summer. This all looked very black, and though Isabel conformed to the manners of Tilling in doing household shopping every morning with her wicker basket, and buying damaged fruit for fool, and in dressing in the original home-made manner indicated by good breeding and narrow incomes, Miss Mapp was sadly afraid that these habits were not the outcome of chaste and instinctive simplicity, but of the ambition to be received by the old families of Tilling as one of them. But what did a true Tillingite want with a butler and a motor-car? And if these were not sufficient to cast grave doubts on the sincerity of the inhabitants of "Ye Smalle House," there was still very vivid in Miss Mapp's mind that dreadful moment, undimmed by the years that had passed over it, when Mrs. Poppit broke the silence at an altogether too sumptuous lunch by asking Mrs. Plaistow if she did not find the super-tax a grievous burden on "our little incomes." ... Miss Mapp had drawn in her breath sharply, as if in pain, and after a few gasps turned the conversation... Worst of all, perhaps, because more recent, was the fact that Mrs. Poppit had just received the dignity of the M.B.E., or Member of the Order of the British Empire, and put it on her cards too, as if to keep the scandal alive. Her services in connection with the Tilling hospital had been entirely confined to putting her motor-car at its disposal when she did not want

it herself, and not a single member of the Tilling Working Club, which had knitted its fingers to the bone and made enough seven-tailed bandages to reach to the moon, had been offered a similar decoration. If anyone had she would have known what to do: a stinging letter to the Prime Minister saying that she worked not with hope of distinction, but from pure patriotism, would have certainly been Miss Mapp's rejoinder. She actually drafted the letter, when Mrs. Poppit's name appeared, and diligently waded through column after column of subsequent lists, to make sure that she, the originator of the Tilling Working Club, had not been the victim of a similar insult.

Mrs. Poppit was a climber: that was what she was, and Miss Mapp was obliged to confess that very nimble she had been. The butler and the motor-car (so frequently at the disposal of Mrs. Poppit's friends) and the incessant lunches and teas had done their work; she had fed rather than starved Tilling into submission, and Miss Mapp felt that she alone upheld the dignity of the old families. She was positively the only old family (and a solitary spinster at that) who had not surrendered to the Poppits. Naturally she did not carry her staunchness to the extent, so to speak, of a hunger-strike, for that would be singular conduct, only worthy of suffragettes, and she partook of the Poppits' hospitality to the fullest extent possible, but (here her principles came in) she never returned the hospitality of the Member of the British Empire, though she occasionally asked Isabel to her house, and abused her soundly on all possible occasions...

This spiteful retrospect passed swiftly and smoothly through Miss Mapp's mind, and did not in the least take off from the acuteness with which she observed the tide in the affairs of Tilling which, after the ebb of the night, was now flowing again, nor did it, a few minutes after Isabel's disappearance round the corner, prevent her from hearing the faint tinkle of the telephone in her own house. At that she started to her feet, but paused again at the door. She had shrewd suspicions about her servants with regard to the telephone: she was convinced (though at present she had not been able to get any evidence on the point) that both her cook and her parlourmaid used it for their own base purposes at her expense, and that their friends habitually employed it for

conversation with them. And perhaps—who knows?—her housemaid was the worst of the lot, for she affected an almost incredible stupidity with regard to the instrument, and pretended not to be able either to speak through it or to understand its cacklings. All that might very well be assumed in order to divert suspicion, so Miss Mapp paused by the door to let any of these delinquents get deep in conversation with her friend: a soft and stealthy advance towards the room called the morning-room (a small apartment opening out of the hall, and used chiefly for the bestowal of hats and cloaks and umbrellas) would then enable her to catch one of them red-mouthed, or at any rate to overhear fragments of conversation which would supply equally direct evidence.

She had got no further than the garden-door into her house when Withers, her parlourmaid, came out. Miss Mapp thereupon began to smile and hum a tune. Then the smile widened and the tune stopped.

"Yes, Withers?" she said. "Were you looking for me?"

"Yes, Miss," said Withers. "Miss Poppit has just rung you up——"

Miss Mapp looked much surprised.

"And to think that the telephone should have rung without my hearing it," she said. "I must be growing deaf, Withers, in my old age. What does Miss Poppit want?"

"She hopes you will be able to go to tea this afternoon and play bridge. She expects that a few friends may look in at a quarter to four."

A flood of lurid light poured into Miss Mapp's mind. To expect that a few friends may look in was the orthodox way of announcing a regular party to which she had not been asked, and Miss Mapp knew as if by a special revelation that if she went, she would find that she made the eighth to complete two tables of bridge. When the butler opened the door, he would undoubtedly have in his hand a half sheet of paper on which were written the names of the expected friends, and if the caller's name was not on that list, he would tell her with brazen impudence that neither Mrs. Poppit nor Miss Poppit were at home, while, before the baffled visitor had turned her back, he would admit another caller who duly appeared on his reference paper... So then the Poppits were giving a bridge-party to which she had only been bidden at the last moment, clearly to take the place of some expected friend who had developed influenza, lost an aunt or been obliged to go to London: here, too, was the explanation of why (as she had overheard yesterday) Major Flint and Captain Puffin were only intending to play one round of golf to-day, and to come back by the 2.20 train. And why seek any further for the

explanation of the lump of ice and the red currants (probably damaged) which she had observed Isabel purchase? And anyone could see (at least Miss Mapp could) why she had gone to the stationer's in the High Street just before. Packs of cards.

Who the expected friend was who had disappointed Mrs. Poppit could be thought out later: at present, as Miss Mapp smiled at Withers and hummed her tune again, she had to settle whether she was going to be delighted to accept, or obliged to decline. The argument in favour of being obliged to decline was obvious: Mrs. Poppit deserved to be "served out" for not including her among the original guests, and if she declined it was quite probable that at this late hour her hostess might not be able to get anyone else, and so one of her tables would be completely spoiled. In favour of accepting was the fact that she would get a rubber of bridge and a good tea, and would be able to say something disagreeable about the red-currant fool, which would serve Miss Poppit out for attempting to crib her ancestral dishes...

A bright, a joyous, a diabolical idea struck her, and she went herself to the telephone, and genteelly wiped the place where Withers had probably breathed on it.

"So kind of you, Isabel," she said, "but I am very busy to-day, and you didn't give me much notice, did you? So I'll try to look in if I can, shall I? I might be able to squeeze it in."

There was a pause, and Miss Mapp knew that she had put Isabel in a hole. If she successfully tried to get somebody else, Miss Mapp might find she could squeeze it in, and there would be nine. If she failed to get someone else, and Miss Mapp couldn't squeeze it in, then there would be seven... Isabel wouldn't have a tranquil moment all day.

"Ah, do squeeze it in," she said in those horrid wheedling tones which for some reason Major Flint found so attractive. That was one of the weak points about him, and there were many, many others. But that was among those which Miss Mapp found it difficult to condone.

"If I possibly can," said Miss Mapp. "But at this late hour—Good-bye, dear, or only *au reservoir*, we hope."

She heard Isabel's polite laugh at this nearly new and delicious Malaprop before she rang off. Isabel collected malaprops and wrote them out in a note book. If you reversed the note-book and began at the

other end, you would find the collection of Spoonerisms, which were very amusing, too.

Tea, followed by a bridge-party, was, in summer, the chief manifestation of the spirit of hospitality in Tilling. Mrs. Poppit, it is true, had attempted to do something in the way of dinner-parties, but though she was at liberty to give as many dinner-parties as she pleased, nobody else had followed her ostentatious example. Dinner-parties entailed a higher scale of living; Miss Mapp, for one, had accurately counted the cost of having three hungry people to dinner, and found that one such dinner-party was not nearly compensated for, in the way of expense, by being invited to three subsequent dinner-parties by your guests. Voluptuous teas were the rule, after which you really wanted no more than little bits of things, a cup of soup, a slice of cold tart, or a dished-up piece of fish and some toasted cheese. Then, after the excitement of bridge (and bridge was very exciting in Tilling), a jig-saw puzzle or Patience cooled your brain and composed your nerves. In winter, however, with its scarcity of daylight, Tilling commonly gave evening bridge-parties, and asked the requisite number of friends to drop in after dinner, though everybody knew that everybody else had only partaken of bits of things. Probably the ruinous price of coal had something to do with these evening bridge-parties, for the fire that warmed your room when you were alone would warm all your guests as well, and then, when your hospitality was returned, you could let your sitting-room fire go out. But though Miss Mapp was already planning something in connection with winter bridge, winter was a long way off yet...

Before Miss Mapp got back to her window in the garden-room Mrs. Poppit's great offensive motor-car, which she always alluded to as "the Royce," had come round the corner and, stopping opposite Major Flint's house, was entirely extinguishing all survey of the street beyond. It was clear enough then that she had sent the Royce to take the two out to the golf-links, so that they should have time to play their round and catch the 2.20 back to Tilling again, so as to be in good time for the bridge-party. Even as she looked, Major Flint came out of his house on one side of the Royce and Captain Puffin on the other. The Royce obstructed their view of each other, and simultaneously each of them shouted across to the house of the other. Captain Puffin emitted a loud "Coo-ee, Major," (an Australian ejaculation, learned on his voyages), while Major Flint bellowed "Qui-hi, Captain," which, all the world knew, was of Oriental origin. The noise each of them made prevented him from hearing the other, and presently one in a fuming hurry to start ran round in front of the car at the precise moment that the other ran round behind it, and they both banged loudly on each other's knockers. These knocks were

not so precisely simultaneous as the shouts had been, and this led to mutual discovery, hailed with peals of falsetto laughter on the part of Captain Puffin and the more manly guffaws of the Major… After that the Royce lumbered down the grass-grown cobbles of the street, and after a great deal of reversing managed to turn the corner.

Miss Mapp set off with her basket to do her shopping. She carried in it the weekly books, which she would leave, with payment but not without argument, at the tradesmen's shops. There was an item for suet which she intended to resist to the last breath in her body, though her butcher would probably surrender long before that. There was an item for eggs at the dairy which she might have to pay, though it was a monstrous overcharge. She had made up her mind about the laundry, she intended to pay that bill with an icy countenance and say "Good morning for ever," or words to that effect, unless the proprietor instantly produced the—the article of clothing which had been lost in the wash (like King John's treasures), or refunded an ample sum for the replacing of it. All these quarrelsome errands were meat and drink to Miss Mapp: Tuesday morning, the day on which she paid and disputed her weekly bills, was as enjoyable as Sunday mornings when, sitting close under the pulpit, she noted the glaring inconsistencies and grammatical errors in the discourse. After the bills were paid and business was done, there was pleasure to follow, for there was a fitting-on at the dress-maker's, the fitting-on of a tea-gown, to be worn at winter-evening bridge-parties, which, unless Miss Mapp was sadly mistaken, would astound and agonize by its magnificence all who set eyes on it. She had found the description of it, as worn by Mrs. Titus W. Trout, in an American fashion paper; it was of what was described as kingfisher blue, and had lumps and wedges of lace round the edge of the skirt, and orange chiffon round the neck. As she set off with her basket full of tradesmen's books, she pictured to herself with watering mouth

the fury, the jealousy, the madness of envy which it would raise in all properly-constituted breasts.

In spite of her malignant curiosity and her cancerous suspicions about all her friends, in spite, too, of her restless activities, Miss Mapp was not, as might have been expected, a lady of lean and emaciated appearance. She was tall and portly, with plump hands, a broad, benignant face and dimpled, well-nourished cheeks. An acute observer might have detected a danger warning in the sidelong glances of her rather bulgy eyes, and in a certain tightness at the corners of her expansive mouth, which boded ill for any who came within snapping distance, but to a more superficial view she was a rollicking, good-natured figure of a woman. Her mode of address, too, bore out this misleading impression: nothing, for instance, could have been more genial just now than her telephone voice to Isabel Poppit, or her smile to Withers, even while she so strongly suspected her of using the telephone for her own base purposes, and as she passed along the High Street, she showered little smiles and bows on acquaintances and friends. She markedly drew back her lips in speaking, being in no way ashamed of her long white teeth, and wore a practically perpetual smile when there was the least chance of being under observation. Though at sermon time on Sunday, as has been already remarked, she greedily noted the weaknesses and errors of which those twenty minutes was so rewardingly full, she sat all the time with down-dropped eyes and a pretty sacred smile on her lips, and now, when she spied on the other side of the street the figure of the vicar, she tripped slantingly across the road to him, as if by the move of a knight at chess, looking everywhere else, and only perceiving him with glad surprise at the very last moment. He was a great frequenter of tea parties and except in Lent an assiduous player of bridge, for a clergyman's duties, so he very

properly held, were not confined to visiting the poor and exhorting the sinner. He should be a man of the world, and enter into the pleasures of his prosperous parishioners, as well as into the trials of the troubled. Being an accomplished card-player he entered not only into their pleasures but their pockets, and there was no lady of Tilling who was not pleased to have Mr. Bartlett for a partner. His winnings, so he said, he gave annually to charitable objects, though whether the charities he selected began at home was a point on which Miss Mapp had quite made up her mind. “Not a penny of that will the poor ever see,” was the gist of her reflections when on disastrous days she paid him seven-and-ninepence. She always called him “Padre,” and had never actually caught him looking over his adversaries' hands.

“Good morning, Padre,” she said as soon as she perceived him. “What a lovely day! The white butterflies were enjoying themselves so in the sunshine in my garden. And the swallows!”

Miss Mapp, as every reader will have perceived, wanted to know whether he was playing bridge this afternoon at the Poppits. Major Flint and Captain Puffin certainly were, and it might be taken for granted that Godiva Plaistow was. With the Poppits and herself that made six...

Mr. Bartlett was humorously archaic in speech. He interlarded archaisms with Highland expressions, and his face was knobby, like a chest of drawers.

“Ha, good morrow, fair dame,” he said. “And prithee, art not thou even as ye white butterflies?”

“Oh, Mr. Bartlett,” said the fair dame with a provocative glance. “Naughty! Comparing me to a delicious butterfly!”

“Nay, prithee, why naughty?” said he. “Yea, indeed, it’s a day to make ye little fowles rejoice! Ha! I perceive you are on the errands of the guid wife Martha.” And he pointed to the basket.

“Yes; Tuesday morning,” said Miss Mapp. “I pay all my household books on Tuesday. Poor but honest, dear Padre. What a rush life is to-day! I hardly know which way to turn. Little duties in all directions! And you; you’re always busy! Such a busy bee!”

“Busy B? Busy Bartlett, quo’ she! Yes, I’m a busy B to-day, Mistress Mapp. Sermon all morning: choir practice at three, a baptism at six. No time for a walk to-day, let alone a bit turn at the gowf.”

Miss Mapp saw her opening, and made a busy bee line for it.

"Oh, but you should get regular exercise, Padre," said she. "You take no care of yourself. After the choir practice now, and before the baptism, you could have a brisk walk. To please me!"

"Yes. I had meant to get a breath of air then," said he. "But ye guid Dame Poppit has insisted that I take a wee hand at the cartes with them, the wifey and I. Prithee, shall we meet there?"

("That makes seven without me," thought Miss Mapp in parenthesis.) Aloud she said:

"If I can squeeze it in, Padre. I have promised dear Isabel to do my best."

"Well, and a lassie can do no mair," said he. "Au reservoir then."

Miss Mapp was partly pleased, partly annoyed by the agility with which the Padre brought out her own particular joke. It was she who had brought it down to Tilling, and she felt she had an option on it at the end of every interview, if she meant (as she had done on this occasion) to bring it out. On the other hand it was gratifying to see how popular it had become. She had heard it last month when on a visit to a friend at that sweet and refined village called Riseholme. It was rather looked down on there, as not being sufficiently intellectual. But within a week of Miss Mapp's return, Tilling rang with it, and she let it be understood that she was the original humorist.

Godiva Plaistow came whizzing along the pavement, a short, stout, breathless body who might, so thought Miss Mapp, have acted up to the full and fell associations of her Christian name without exciting the smallest curiosity on the part of the lewd. (Miss Mapp had much the same sort of figure, but her height, so she was perfectly satisfied to imagine, converted corpulence into majesty.) The swift alternation of those Dutch-looking feet gave the impression that Mrs. Plaistow was going at a prodigious speed, but they could stop revolving without any warning, and then she stood still. Just when a collision with Miss Mapp seemed imminent, she came to a dead halt.

It was as well to be quite certain that she was going to the Poppits, and Miss Mapp forgave and forgot about the worsted until she had found out. She could never quite manage the indelicacy of saying "Godiva," whatever Mrs. Plaistow's figure and age might happen to be, but always addressed her as "Diva," very affectionately, whenever they were on speaking terms.

"What a lovely morning, Diva darling," she said; and noticing that Mr. Bartlett was well out of earshot, "The white butterflies were enjoying themselves so in the sunshine in my garden. And the swallows."

Godiva was telegraphic in speech.

"Lucky birds," she said. "No teeth. Beaks."