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Opening Extract from...

Major Benjy

Written by Guy Fraser-Sampson

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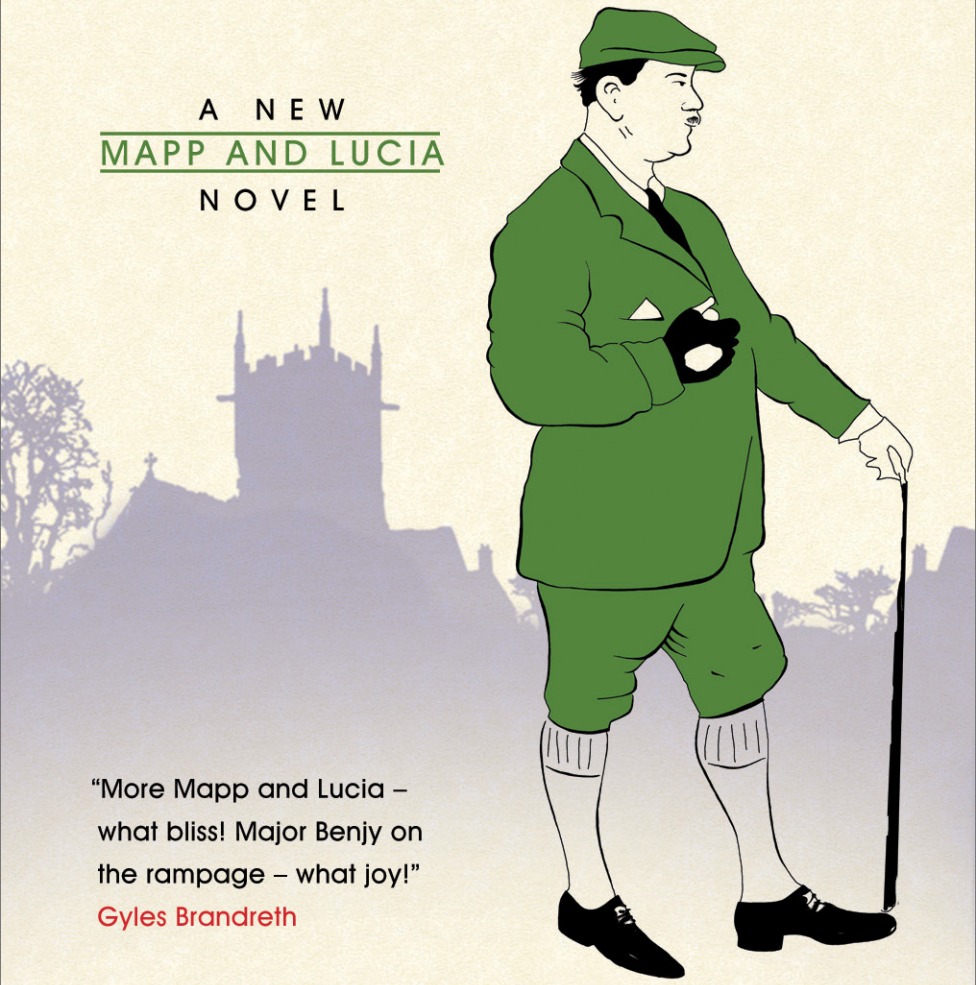
GUY FRASER-SAMPSON

MAJOR BENJY

A NEW
MAPP AND LUCIA
NOVEL



"More Mapp and Lucia – what bliss! Major Benjy on the rampage – what joy!"
Gyles Brandreth

Major Benjy

Major Benjy

A Mapp and Lucia novel

Guy Fraser-Sampson

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Chapter 1

The picturesque town of Tilling perches confidently on a rocky outcrop that once jutted proudly out to sea, making it an ideal setting for a constant game of hide and seek between smugglers and customs men. Alas, the natural harbour which had been the town's *raison d'être* silted up, and the English Channel gradually retreated, leaving behind only salt marshes and colonies of vociferous gulls. Despite these vicissitudes of history, however, Tilling remains a popular and attractive place of residence for ladies and gentlemen of refined tastes, and its landmarks, such as the Landgate, the gun platform and the delightful church, offer ready subjects for what they typically refer to in self-deprecating fashion as their 'daubs'.

Had one been standing on top of the church tower one spring morning, one would have seen the blackness of the night sky beginning to acquire a distinctly purplish tinge over the Kentish marshes to the east, which could perhaps have been conveyed by some rather daring sponging with cobalt violet, before turning rapidly into a pinkish-grey mistiness, which would in all conscience have required talent of Turneresque proportions to portray, talents far beyond those even of candidates considered by the Tilling hanging committee. However, even while their hesitant hands had been reaching for the permanent magenta, the pure pale sunlight for which Tilling is justly famous would have spread rapidly across the landscape below like a giant rug being unfurled, and the town would have acquired the appearance by which it was instantly recognisable

from any number of paintings. Apart, that is, from those of Irene Coles, universally known as Quaint Irene, who, while being Tilling's only acknowledged professional artist, seemed to perceive Tilling somewhat differently from the mere mortals around her, and whose views of the High Street could inexplicably involve large numbers of naked people dancing around a burning town hall while winged and clawed ghoulies, some of which could bear an amazing though surely accidental resemblance to various worthy Tilling residents, hovered and screeched overhead.

Sadly, though, nobody was standing on the church tower to admire this artistic kaleidoscope unfolding, since it was generally recognised that polite society in Tilling did not rise before nine, at which time one might decently draw back one's curtains and consume a hearty breakfast. It was, however, understood and accepted that Miss Mapp would rise well before this point, since she was known to favour the early morning as her 'thinking time', when she would sit dreamily in the window of the garden room at Mallards with a finger resting across her chin and a faraway expression on her face, surely too dreamily for anyone to think that she might be observing the manner and time of her neighbours' houses coming to life.

This morning the famous Tilling sunshine beat persistently against a bedroom window upon which Miss Mapp's glassily unseeing gaze had been resting for a good hour or so, and filtered into the room through the cracks in the shutters, casting a ladder of light and shade on the countenance of a middle-aged man lying in bed and becoming slowly and somewhat reluctantly acquainted with the happy morn.

Major Benjamin Flint, late of His Majesty's Indian Army, was apt to be in poor spirits first thing in the morning, and could frequently be heard berating his servant should his kippers be cold or his porridge lumpy. On such occasions he would confide to his friends that he was 'not quite the thing' that morning, and would hint darkly at recurrent and mysterious diseases of tropical origin. His friends would naturally commiserate most sympathetically with an officer

who had been forced to do such violence to his long-term health in the service of King and country. Yet as soon as he moved on they would conjecture amongst themselves that the good major's ailment probably had more to do with prolonged exposure to Bombay gin than to the city of the same name.

Major Benjy, as he was universally known, lay in that halfway state between sleep and wakefulness, when one is fully conscious only of a headache and trying to come to terms with the enormity of getting out of bed, while being somewhat preoccupied with thoughts of something one has forgotten and really should have remembered. With a heartfelt groan he swung two hairy legs out of bed, felt for his slippers, and then opened the shutters. This proved to be something of a mistake as the pure Tilling sunlight struck him squarely in the face and he uttered a little cry and tottered backwards, sitting down again heavily on the bed. From her vantage point Miss Mapp heard the cry and stored it away tidily in that part of her mind which was reserved for the fermenting of solicitous enquiries after an individual's well-being which could be delivered quizzically, though in a kind, neighbourly fashion, during the morning's shopping.

Major Benjy's second attempt at embracing the day was rather more successful than the first and some moments later found him sitting at the breakfast table, which Sarah, his servant, seemed quite inexplicably to have neglected to lay that morning, and staring fixedly at his newspaper. Fixed though his gaze might be, his nostrils twitched, at first with puzzlement and then with mounting rage. Where his olfactory receptors might reasonably have expected to encounter the aroma of toast, kippers, bacon or coffee, they met none. The conclusion was inescapable: his breakfast was not ready, not even in the course of preparation, and so his brave attempt at coming downstairs without even the benefit of aspirin or bicarbonate of soda had been in vain. He drew an ample breath and shouted 'Quai-Hai!' at the top of his voice, though he knew it was likely to hurt. It did.

Framed in the window of her garden room, Miss Mapp allowed a knowing smile to flit briefly across her face. At much the same time the Major, still attempting to focus on his newspaper, happened to open it at the page of classified advertisements and in that moment there came upon him the awful realisation of what it was that he had forgotten but really ought to have remembered. Sarah, having given notice a month previously when he had occasion to exchange sharp words with her about his kippers, had left the day before, and his increasingly desperate efforts in recent days to find a replacement through the columns of the *Tilling Gazette* had proved fruitless. There was no Sarah to make his bed or tidy his room. There was no Sarah patiently to retrieve his golf clubs from the various corners into which he flung them after losing half a crown on the eighteenth green to the Padre. Worse still, infinitely worse, there was no Sarah to cook his breakfast. He gave a hollow groan, dropped the newspaper on to the bare table and went dejectedly in search of Alka-Seltzer.

Miss Mapp, by contrast, decided that she had probably been seen at her thoughtful best for quite long enough for one day, and busied herself with her preparations for her daily shopping trip. Shopping for oneself may be thought of as something of an eccentricity when one has a servant, but to refer to Tilling's morning *passeggiata* as 'shopping' would be akin to describing Wagner's Ring cycle as light musical entertainment. First it was an opportunity to keep oneself abreast of Tilling developments, and here there was a whole ritual of exchanges to be observed, starting with the hopeful query 'Any news?', not forgetting the ejaculatory 'No!' of feigned disbelief and secret delight at each new disclosure. For the 'news' referred to was not of the variety that could be found in any newspaper, except perhaps occasionally in the *Tilling Gazette*. There was a world beyond Tilling to be sure, but no true Tillingite deigned to acknowledge it. Their world was bounded by the stone walls of the original cinque port. Even Tilling new town could be regarded as *terra incognita*.

Second, it was an opportunity to display a new outfit, and never

more so than now, at what could almost credibly be called the start of the summer season. Shopping in the crude sense in which that word was used outside Tilling society, the actual purchase of comestibles, came a long way third. Miss Mapp would typically content herself with one or two choice items which would not weigh down her basket too heavily while she was standing talking, and leave the real business of stocking the house to her servant, Withers. Fridays were the only exception to this rule. On the fifth day God had created the great creatures of the sea and winged birds, but for Miss Mapp it was when she sallied forth, her weekly books of account in her basket, to indulge in numerous highly enjoyable arguments with the local tradesmen.

Happily this was not a Friday and so she would be able to devote herself entirely to the welfare of her fellow Tillingites. She donned hat and gloves in front of the hall mirror and stepped into West Street with her usual rolling gait. The first house on the left was that of the Major, standing opposite what had until quite recently been the home of the late Captain Puffin. It had been the scene of scandal when the Major and the Captain were understood to have fought a duel over the matter of her womanly affections, and she was careful to deny the story afresh every time there seemed any danger of the incident being forgotten.

Her shortest path to Twistevant's, the greengrocer, lay undeniably to the right, but she hesitated and turned left instead, to knock a trifle imperiously at the Major's front door. There was what sounded suspiciously like some swearing from the innermost depths, and then the door was opened abruptly by the Major himself with a peremptory 'Yes?'. It was unfortunate that a combination of a bad hangover and no breakfast should have made the Major forgetful. It was doubly unfortunate that what he should have forgotten were his trousers.

Miss Mapp had always felt herself equal to any social dilemma that might befall her, but even her resolute personality was momentarily

nonplussed by the irrefutable fact that she, an unmarried woman of unimpeachable virtue, could be seen standing in broad daylight in the streets of Tilling talking to an unmarried man dressed impeccably in collar and tie above the waist, but below it simply in a pair of long woollen underpants of indeterminate hue. She quelled the instinctive shriek that rose unbidden in her maidenly throat, and decided that by far the kindest thing would be simply to ignore these circumstances.

'Good morning, Major,' she cooed, her eyes fixed determinedly on his face. 'I felt I should just see if everything was all right, as I thought I heard you cry out a little earlier. I wondered if perhaps you had cut yourself shaving?'

The Major's realisation that he was not wearing any trousers had come a second or two after Miss Mapp's, and roused in him a perturbation that was second only to her own. What on earth could he do? To slam the door in her face was an option, but could be quickly dismissed on the grounds of how rude it would look. To cower behind it with his head poking around the edge was surely unmanly. His eyes met her own fixed and somewhat desperate gaze and he decided in an instant to take his lead from her and pretend that nothing was amiss.

'Miss Elizabeth,' he said, and then he said 'Ah!' to give himself time to think. He said 'Ah!' a lot and found that provided he said it in various different tones of voice it answered pretty well for many situations. For example, if someone said something you did not understand, but which sounded rather clever, then saying 'Ah!' in the right way could convey the message 'Yes, I understand and agree with everything you're saying, although perhaps there are a few subtle nuances you may not fully have considered', which was infinitely preferable to standing there with a blank expression on your face. This tactic was frequently of great assistance during conversations with Mr Wyse, who was apt to mention someone with an Italian-sounding name and then bow significantly. If you said, 'By Jove, yes, that man could paint,' he usually turned out to be an opera singer and Mr Wyse

would courteously try to mask his contempt for your intellectual failings, and almost succeed; could make a man feel jolly small, that.

He realised that he had used up most of the pause which an 'Ah!' could properly be said to command, and toyed with saying it again. This could be dangerous, as to say 'Ah!' once and significantly could be seen as the sign of a deeply thoughtful man who is pondering some complex abstract concept, whereas to say it twice could be seen as the sign of a deeply thoughtless man who has just realised that he is standing at his open front door with no trousers on. With difficulty, he continued the surreal conversation.

'No, no, quite well, thank you, dear lady,' he assured her. 'Perhaps it was a gull you heard? They are particularly noisy at this time of year, I find. Something to do with nesting, perhaps?'

'Ah yes, that must have been it. A gull, of course.'

Usually Miss Mapp would not have let her victim off so lightly, and would have remained on the doorstep, twisting the knife for as long as possible with tender enquiries after the Major's servant problem and state of health, but on this occasion she was understandably anxious to bring the interview to a close as quickly as possible. However, just as she started to bid the Major a smiling farewell, disaster struck. First the fishmonger's boy rode past on his bicycle and made a most inappropriate remark. This Miss Mapp could at least pretend not to hear, but she had no such option with the second cruel shaft which fate now fired in her direction. Immediately behind the first cyclist rode another, and who should it turn out to be but Quaint Irene, who rang her bell vigorously and hooted 'What-ho, Benjy! Bit eager today, aren't you?' as she disappeared round the corner.

Miss Mapp and Major Benjy looked at each other for a moment in horrified silence, and then with a muttered parting they went their separate ways, she to stomp in silent fury to Twistevant's, and he to sink in a pale and trembling heap on to a chair in his hallway. Major Flint had encountered various tricky situations during his army career, although not nearly as many as appeared with monotonous regularity

in his recollections of military life, but nothing could compare to the hopeless, aching dread which he now felt at the prospect of having to open his front door (after having attired himself correctly, of course) and face his friends and neighbours. At times of extreme distress or uncertainty, particularly if coupled with mild inebriation, he was apt to draw himself to attention and salute, but even the thought of this did little to lift his depression on this occasion.

His morning had started badly. He was in possession of neither servant nor breakfast. He owed money to his wine merchant and, more dashingly yet more dangerously, to a bookmaker in Hastings. He had thought things could hardly get worse, and yet, clad in a pair of somewhat dingy combinations, he had just opened the door to the most redoubtable defender of Tilling society's respectability. He buried his head in his hands as he realised that he must shortly leave his house and face that very Tilling society who would by now, since news travelled fast among the basket-carrying classes, doubtless be in full possession of the facts.

In consequence it was some time before he put in an appearance on the streets of Tilling, shopping basket in hand as he walked stiffly in search of provisions. Mercifully Irene Coles was nowhere to be seen. Diva Plaistow was, however, walking towards him on the same side of the road and short of crossing the road to avoid her, which was plainly unthinkable, some effort at conversation was going to have to be made.

'Mrs Plaistow, good morning.' He raised his hat. For once, 'Any news?' did not seem an appropriate greeting. There was always the chance, he assured himself hopefully, that the 'news' of which he was himself the subject may not yet have leaked out. He could see instantly that such hopes were in vain. Diva Plaistow, who usually issued forth volubly yet telegraphically, was evidently in difficulties. Her larynx was going up and down with little gulping noises, but no recognisable words were emerging.

'Quite well, I trust?' enquired the Major.

‘Yes, thank you,’ uttered Diva at last, and then instantly decided to take refuge in flight. ‘Would love to … can’t stay … things to do,’ she trailed behind her as she headed back in the direction from which she had come. The Major followed at a discreet distance. Damn! Here was Miss Mapp coming towards him and that was the very last thing he wanted at this precise moment, but there was nothing for it but to raise his hat again and say ‘Miss Elizabeth’ with as normal a countenance as he could manage.

Miss Mapp fixed a beatific smile upon him. She had decided to continue with her strategy of pretending that nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened. Unfortunately the Major himself now proceeded rather clumsily to forestall this.

‘I feel I must apologise, dear lady, for the unfortunate incident just now. I hope you will understand that …’ he searched for words, and decided upon ‘a combination of circumstances’. Unfortunately the gear wheels in his rather stressed mind slipped and crashed, and what actually came out was ‘a circumstance of combinations’. Miss Mapp blanched visibly. ‘Combinations’ was the one word which had been going round in her head for some time, and the one which she had hoped never to hear uttered again.

‘Dear Major,’ she said quickly, for who knew what he might say next, ‘old friends as we are, perhaps we could forget the incident entirely. You will render me the greatest service imaginable if you would neither think of it nor refer to it ever again.’

Relief flooded into his face. ‘Absolutely! Quite!’ he said, and then another ‘Quite!’ for good measure.

Miss Mapp pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed deeply. Nobody could be resident in Tilling for very long without coming to recognise this as one of her ‘Magnanimously though I am behaving, I am nonetheless deeply distressed and may indeed never recover’ moments, and the Major had lived in Tilling longer than most.

‘Decent of you, Miss Elizabeth,’ he hissed fervently, ‘damned decent, if I may say so. More than I deserve, of course.’

Miss Mapp released the bridge of her nose from her pained grip and smiled beatifically once more. Benjy took this as indicating that her moment of intense suffering had passed.

'And now, dear Major,' she continued briskly, showing that she was determinedly putting the whole sordid episode behind her, 'do tell me what you are doing to replace that wretched woman Sarah.'

'Ah!' This time it was a deeply heartfelt 'Ah', the meaning of which required no conscious modulation of tone. In it Miss Mapp read a whole story of untold suffering, of unprovided bacon and egg, unironed shirts and unpolished shoes. Perhaps this might be the time to renew her efforts to persuade the Major to abandon his fine manly reserve and surrender himself to the feelings of passion and irresistible attraction that he must perforce feel whenever he was in her presence; but the time was not yet. The more abject his position, the more ready he would be to surmise that perhaps her demeanour of girlish virtue may, reluctantly of course, be cast aside.

She cocked her head on one side in that curious birdlike way that all her acquaintances remarked upon ('Mapp's bird-of-prey look' was Irene's unflattering description) and gazed dreamily at the Major. No sooner had she done so than she rather wished she hadn't, for she found that with her head cocked to one side the sun was directly in her eyes and her dreamy gaze instantly became a watery squint which she was sure could not be at all becoming. She shifted her weight to the other foot so that she swayed into the Major's substantial shadow.

'Have you thought of widening the scope of your search?' she enquired.

The Major looked to be at something of a loss. 'How do you mean? Advertise for a valet instead? Or a butler? Bit beyond me, I'm afraid.'

'No, no.' Miss Mapp adopted the pitying look she always employed when dealing with men, which conveyed for anyone who cared to look (or to enquire if they remained in the slightest doubt) her amused though fond contempt for those who had no grasp of practical domestic matters. 'If the *Tilling Gazette* doesn't answer the

situation then why not try casting your net further afield? Why not take the train into Hastings and try the *East Sussex Advertiser*, or even into Brighton and the *Sussex Chronicle*?'

Normally the Major's first thought would have been of the ruinous expenditure in train fares and advertising fees involved in such an endeavour, but today his thoughts of empty breakfast tables vanquished his finer feelings.

'By Jove, you're right,' he exclaimed. 'Of course you are. Why bless you, Miss Elizabeth, you always have the advice a chap needs to get him out of any fix. Can't think why I didn't ask you before.'

In truth Miss Mapp was very glad he hadn't, since the idea had only just come to her, but she smiled beatifically once more and said, 'Oh, you men are so helpless,' as she tripped homewards in a manner which she sincerely hoped was girlish.

Major Benjy stood undecided in West Street, a conflict of wants tugging at his emotions. On the one hand lay a round of golf on a sunny morning, followed by a few whiskies in the clubhouse. On the other lay a tedious train journey with a nonetheless necessary purpose. Prospects of long-term breakfast and supper triumphed over short-term gratification, however, and he strode purposefully to the station to check the times of trains to Hastings and Brighton.

While the Major's military tread was tramping towards the railway, an interesting scene was being played out in the public bar of a nearby public house, where Irene Coles could be discerned with a large Amazon, Lucy by name, and a nondescript man in a shabby suit, whose fingers seemed stained in equal parts by nicotine and ink, just as, it must be admitted, were Irene's own, though hers exhibited a more multicoloured hue since they bore the remains of just about every individual part of her armoury of paints. Lucy was variously described as Irene's maid, helpmate, muse, companion or model, depending on who was doing the describing and what their mood was towards Irene at the time. In truth the precise basis upon which the two shared Taormina, Irene's cottage, was something

upon which polite Tilling society preferred not to speculate openly, though Major Flint, Mr Wyse and, until recently, the late Captain Puffin had done so privately on many occasions in the saloon bar of the Trader's Arms. Whatever conclusions these nocturnal symposia had reached had evidently done nothing to diminish either lady in Major Flint's estimation, as Miss Mapp noted frequently to her bitter disappointment. For Irene he maintained a comradely intimacy and they were often to be seen laughing loudly and suddenly during an otherwise respectable tea party, digging each other in the ribs in what she considered to be a positively common manner. Where Lucy was concerned he was apt simply to stand and gaze at her in rapt admiration, exclaiming 'By Jove!' as her statuesque frame proceeded majestically the length of the High Street.

The nondescript man, who had already bought each of them one pint of bitter, was looking at a piece of paper which he held in his hand and chuckling repeatedly as he exclaimed 'Upon my soul!' and 'You've caught them exactly!' A casual onlooker might have deduced from what they caught (accidentally and unwillingly, of course) of the conversation that the piece of paper was an artistic work by Irene and, the gentleman being the erstwhile editor of the *Tilling Gazette*, that she was attempting to interest him in its publication, and on this occasion the surmises of the casual observer would have been absolutely correct.

The representative of the fourth estate regretted deeply that he was unable to make use of Miss Coles's sketch, though he personally found it of great interest, and of course most skilfully executed. After having bought Irene and Lucy another pint of bitter each, he managed to extricate himself from the temptations of an extended lunch hour in the pub and returned to his office, still suffering from occasional fits of spontaneous mirth, leaving Irene gazing ruefully at her sketch and observing bitterly that once again the true extent of her talent had gone cruelly unappreciated. Save at the annual Tilling art exhibition, Irene's work languished mostly unseen and

unadmired in her cramped studio at Taormina, though she had converted those windows of the cottage which overlooked the street into an impromptu gallery by displaying works up against the panes, from which position they could receive their proper due from passing art enthusiasts and (who knows?) potential purchasers. Somewhat dejected, but consoled by some excellent beer courtesy of the *Gazette*'s expense account and the prospect of steak and kidney pudding for supper, they headed homewards.

Miss Mapp was meanwhile giving her gardener his orders with all her customary firmness but quite uncharacteristic lack of attention. For one thing, the thought of her recent predicament still lingered as an unpleasant distraction. For another, her parting shot at Major Benjy had set a train of thought in motion, a train of thought which might quite possibly leave the branch line of prudent parsimony and launch itself on the mainline of unexpected riches. Every summer Elizabeth Mapp granted a summer lease of dear Mallards to some entirely undeserving individual and went to live for two months in Wasters, Diva Plaistow's house, while Diva rented Taormina from Irene. Irene and Lucy in turn moved into a fisherman's shack out of town near the beach and cycled in every morning to do their shopping, getting browner and more salt-stained, and exuding an ever heavier odour of fish as the summer progressed, their temporary dwelling's ablutionary arrangements being virtually non-existent and its sanitary provisions best left to the imagination.

These arrangements had hardened over time into a permanent part of Tilling's micro-economy, and for each participant represented a welcome cash windfall to help tide them over until the following summer. Miss Mapp benefited in addition by being able to reap nature's bounty from two gardens rather than one (since she cannily let Mallards on terms which excluded garden produce, but rented Wasters on terms which included it), and was able to bottle or make into jam everything which she could not sell to Twistevant's. For some time, however, Miss Mapp's fertile mind had been at work

on how she might increase the shamefully small recompense which she received for grudgingly allowing a total stranger the use of her wonderful house. The assurances of whichever of Mr Woolgar and Mr Pipstow was so unfortunate as to be in the office when she came calling that the sums she received represented in every way a fair market rent did little to satisfy her. Why should she not take some of her own advice and cast her net more widely by advertising in the newspapers, rather than relying on the dubious merits of a card in Woolgar and Pipstow's window? Perhaps she might even give the Major the wording of her own advertisement to take with him, thus very sensibly saving herself the totally unnecessary expense of a train ticket? She reached for pen and paper and began to write.

As Miss Mapp finished her writing and laid aside her pen, she thought she heard the roar of a savage animal in the distance and wondered nervously if the bull from the farm just outside town had again broken down its fence and made its way into Tilling, as it had done a few months ago. Fortunately no harm had been done on that occasion before the farmer recaptured it, if one overlooks something dreadfully unfortunate which it did all over Diva's doorstep. As she put on her hat to hurry out in search of Major Benjy, she heard the roar again and hesitated over whether to open the door and brave the street. As she did so, however, she realised that there was something very familiar about that roar, and so it was more in curiosity than in trepidation that she finally set foot outside.

Major Benjy was striding up the road, his face red with fury, and slapping his walking stick heavily and repeatedly against his leg. As they met she turned an enquiring gaze upon him, but found that he was virtually incoherent with rage.

'Miss Elizabeth!' he spluttered. 'Never have I seen such a vile outrage – never!' He took her by the arm (an act which would in happier times have provoked a riot of modest emotions, perhaps even leading to the necessity for an application of smelling salts) and propelled her down the road. As they came level with Taormina he

poked a violent stick at one of its windows. There, for all of Tilling to see, was the sketch in which Irene had tried to interest the editor earlier that day.

The drawing was brief but effective. A few pencil lines had caught both Major Benjy and Miss Mapp so accurately that there could be no doubt as to their identity. The Major was standing framed in his own doorway in collar, tie and combinations, while Miss Mapp was gazing at him with a look of astonishment on her face. Behind them was a brief squiggle, which was undeniably the delivery boy on his bike, and a speech balloon captured his immortal line, which Miss Mapp had been trying so hard to forget: 'Show us yours, love, and we can all have a good laugh!'

As if this gross indignity were not enough, Irene had obviously been sufficiently interested in the scene to essay one or two variations upon it, and next to the original sketch was another. This was again in monochrome, but with the addition of a large pink blob representing the Major's nose, while this time Miss Mapp was also unclothed below the waist, her modesty protected by a voluminous pair of bloomers which were in exactly the same hue of pink. Miss Mapp decided that the time had come to faint and she collapsed with a little sigh. She preserved her presence of mind sufficiently to collapse in the Major's direction, and he gallantly caught her as she fell.