BARCLAY FLORENCE LOUISA

THE ROSARY

Florence Barclay

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Barclay F.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
ENTER THE DUCHESS

The peaceful stillness of an English summer afternoon brooded over the park and gardens at Overdene. A hush of moving sunlight and lengthening shadows lay upon the lawn, and a promise of refreshing coolness made the shade of the great cedar tree a place to be desired.

The old stone house, solid, substantial, and unadorned, suggested unlimited spaciousness and comfort within; and was redeemed from positive ugliness without, by the fine ivy, magnolia trees, and wistaria, of many years' growth, climbing its plain face, and now covering it with a mantle of soft green, large white blooms, and a cascade of purple blossom.

A terrace ran the full length of the house, bounded at one end by a large conservatory, at the other by an aviary. Wide stone steps, at intervals, led down from the terrace on to the soft springy turf of the lawn. Beyond—the wide park; clumps of old trees, haunted by shy brown deer; and, through the trees, fitful gleams of the river, a narrow silver ribbon, winding gracefully in and out between long grass, buttercups, and cow-daisies.

The sun-dial pointed to four o'clock.

The birds were having their hour of silence. Not a trill sounded from among the softly moving leaves, not a chirp, not a twitter. The stillness seemed almost oppressive. The one brilliant spot of colour in the landscape was a large scarlet macaw, asleep on his stand under the cedar.

At last came the sound of an opening door. A quaint old figure stepped out on to the terrace, walked its entire length to the right, and disappeared into the rose-garden. The Duchess of Meldrum had gone to cut her roses.

She wore an ancient straw hat, of the early-Victorian shape known as "mushroom," tied with black ribbons beneath her portly chin; a loose brown holland coat; a very short tweed skirt, and Engadine "gouties." She had on some very old gauntlet gloves, and carried a wooden basket and a huge pair of scissors.

A wag had once remarked that if you met her Grace of Meldrum returning from gardening or feeding her poultry, and were in a charitable frame of mind, you would very likely give her sixpence. But, after you had thus drawn her attention to yourself and she looked at you, Sir Walter Raleigh's cloak would not be in it! Your one possible course would be to collapse into the mud, and let the ducal "gouties" trample on you. This the duchess would do with gusto; then accept your apologies with good nature; and keep your sixpence, to show when she told the story.

The duchess lived alone; that is to say, she had no desire for the perpetual companionship of any of her own kith and kin, nor for the constant smiles and flattery of a paid companion. Her pale daughter, whom she had systematically snubbed, had married; her handsome son, whom she had adored and spoiled, had prematurely died, before the death, a few years since, of Thomas, fifth Duke of Meldrum. He had come to a sudden and, as the duchess often remarked, very suitable end; for, on his sixty-second birthday, clad in all the splendours of his hunting scarlet, top hat, and buff corduroy breeches, the mare he was mercilessly putting at an impossible fence suddenly refused, and Thomas, Duke of Meldrum, shot into a field of turnips; pitched upon his head, and spoke no more.

This sudden cessation of his noisy and fiery life meant a complete transformation in the entourage of the duchess. Hitherto she had had to tolerate the boon companions, congenial to himself, with whom he chose to fill the house; or to invite those of her own friends to whom she could

explain Thomas, and who suffered Thomas gladly, out of friendship for her, and enjoyment of lovely Overdene. But even then the duchess had no pleasure in her parties; for, quaint rough diamond though she herself might appear, the bluest of blue blood ran in her veins; and, though her manner had the off-hand abruptness and disregard of other people's feelings not unfrequently found in old ladies of high rank, she was at heart a true gentlewoman, and could always be trusted to say and do the right thing in moments of importance: The late duke's language had been sulphurous and his manners Georgian; and when he had been laid in the unwonted quiet of his ancestral vault—"so unlike him, poor dear," as the duchess remarked, "that it is quite a comfort to know he is not really there"—her Grace looked around her, and began to realise the beauties and possibilities of Overdene.

At first she contented herself with gardening, making an aviary, and surrounding herself with all sorts of queer birds and beasts; upon whom she lavished the affection which, of late years, had known no human outlet.

But after a while her natural inclination to hospitality, her humorous enjoyment of other people's foibles, and a quaint delight in parading her own, led to constant succession of house-parties at Overdene, which soon became known as a Liberty Hall of varied delights where you always met the people you most wanted to meet, found every facility for enjoying your favourite pastime, were fed and housed in perfect style, and spent some of the most ideal days of your summer, or cheery days of your winter, never dull, never bored, free to come and go as you pleased, and everything seasoned everybody with the delightful "sauce piquante" of never being quite sure what the duchess would do or say next.

She mentally arranged her parties under three heads—"freak parties," "mere people parties," and "best parties." A "best party" was in progress on the lovely June day when the duchess, having enjoyed an unusually long siesta, donned what she called her "garden togs" and sallied forth to cut roses.

As she tramped along the terrace and passed through the little iron gate leading to the rose-garden, Tommy, the scarlet macaw, opened one eye and watched her; gave a loud kiss as she reached the gate and disappeared from view, then laughed to himself and went to sleep again.

Of all the many pets, Tommy was prime favourite. He represented the duchess's one concession to morbid sentiment. After the demise of the duke she had found it so depressing to be invariably addressed with suave deference by every male voice she heard. If the butler could have snorted, or the rector have rapped out an uncomplimentary adjective, the duchess would have felt cheered. As it was, a fixed and settled melancholy lay upon her spirit until she saw in a dealer's list an advertisement of a prize macaw, warranted a grand talker, with a vocabulary of over five hundred words.

The duchess went immediately to town, paid a visit to the dealer, heard a few of the macaw's words and the tone in which he said them, bought him on the spot, and took him down to Overdene. The first evening he sat crossly on the perch of his grand new stand, declining to say a single one of his five hundred words, though the duchess spent her evening in the hall, sitting in every possible place; first close to him; then, away in a distant corner; in an arm-chair placed behind a screen; reading, with her back turned, feigning not to notice him; facing him with concentrated attention. Tommy merely clicked his tongue at her every time she emerged from a hiding-place; or, if the rather worried butler or nervous under-footman passed hurriedly through the hall, sent showers of kisses after them, and then went into fits of ventriloquial laughter. The duchess, in despair, even tried reminding him in a whisper of the remarks he had made in the shop; but Tommy only winked at her and put his claw over his beak. Still, she enjoyed his flushed and scarlet appearance, and retired to rest hopeful and in no wise regretting her bargain.

The next morning it became instantly evident to the house-maid who swept the hall, the footman who sorted the letters, and the butler who sounded the breakfast gong, that a good night's rest had restored to Tommy the full use of his vocabulary. And when the duchess came sailing down the stairs, ten minutes after the gong had sounded, and Tommy, flapping his wings angrily, shrieked at

her: "Now then, old girl! Come on!" she went to breakfast in a more cheerful mood than she had known for months past.

CHAPTER II
INTRODUCES THE HONOURABLE JANE

The only one of her relatives who practically made her home with the duchess was her niece and former ward, the Honourable Jane Champion; and this consisted merely in the fact that the Honourable Jane was the one person who might invite herself to Overdene or Portland Place, arrive when she chose, stay as long as she pleased, and leave when it suited her convenience. On the death of her father, when her lonely girlhood in her Norfolk home came to an end, she would gladly have filled the place of a daughter to the duchess. But the duchess did not require a daughter; and a daughter with pronounced views, plenty of back-bone of her own, a fine figure, and a plain face, would have seemed to her Grace of Meldrum a peculiarly undesirable acquisition. So Jane was given to understand that she might come whenever she liked, and stay as long as she liked, but on the same footing as other people. This meant liberty to come and go as she pleased; and no responsibility towards her aunt's guests. The duchess preferred managing her own parties in her oven way.

Jane Champion was now in her thirtieth year. She had once been described, by one who saw below the surface, as a perfectly beautiful woman in an absolutely plain shell; and no man had as yet looked beneath the shell, and seen the woman in her perfection. She would have made earth heaven for a blind lover who, not having eyes for the plainness of her face or the massiveness of her figure, might have drawn nearer, and apprehended the wonder of her as a woman, experiencing the wealth of tenderness of which she was capable, the blessed comfort of the shelter of her love, the perfect comprehension of her sympathy, the marvellous joy of winning and wedding her. But as yet, no blind man with far-seeing vision had come her way; and it always seemed to be her lot to take a second place, on occasions when she would have filled the first to infinite perfection.

She had been bridesmaid at weddings where the charming brides, notwithstanding their superficial loveliness, possessed few of the qualifications for wifehood with which she was so richly endowed.

She was godmother to her friends' babies, she, whose motherhood would have been a thing for wonder and worship.

She had a glorious voice, but her face not matching it, its existence was rarely suspected; and as she accompanied to perfection, she was usually in requisition to play for the singing of others.

In short, all her life long Jane had filled second places, and filled them very contentedly. She had never known what it was to be absolutely first with any one. Her mother's death had occurred during her infancy, so that she had not even the most shadowy remembrance of that maternal love and tenderness which she used sometimes to try to imagine, although she had never experienced it.

Her mother's maid, a faithful and devoted woman, dismissed soon after the death of her mistress, chancing to be in the neighbourhood some twelve years later, called at the manor, in the hope of finding some in the household who remembered her.

After tea, Fraulein and Miss Jebb being out of the way, she was spirited up into the schoolroom to see Miss Jane, her heart full of memories of the "sweet babe" upon whom she and her dear lady had lavished so much love and care.

She found awaiting her a tall, plain girl with a frank, boyish manner and a rather disconcerting way as she afterwards remarked, of "taking stock of a body the while one was a-talking," which at first checked the flow of good Sarah's reminiscences, poured forth so freely in the housekeeper's room below, and reduced her to looking tearfully around the room, remarking that she remembered choosing the blessed wall-paper with her dear lady now gone, whose joy had been so great when the dear babe first took notice and reached up for the roses. "And I can show you, miss, if you care to know it just which bunch of roses it were."

But before Sarah's visit was over, Jane had heard many undreamed-of-things; amongst others, that her mother used to kiss her little hands, "ah, many a time she, did, miss; called them little rose-petals, and covered them with kisses."

The child, utterly unused to any demonstrations of affection, looked at her rather ungainly brown hands and laughed, simply because she was ashamed of the unwonted tightening at her throat and the queer stinging of tears beneath her eyelids. Thus Sarah departed under the impression that Miss Jane had grown up into a rather a heartless young lady. But Fraulein and Jebbie never knew why, from that day onward, the hands, of which they had so often had cause to complain, were kept scrupulously clean; and on her birthday night, unashamed in the quiet darkness, the lonely little child kissed her own hands beneath the bedclothes, striving thus to reach the tenderness of her dead mother's lips.

And in after years, when she became her own mistress, one of her first actions was to advertise for Sarah Matthews and engage her as her own maid, at a salary which enabled the good woman eventually to buy herself a comfortable annuity.

Jane saw but little of her father, who had found it difficult to forgive her, firstly, for being a girl when he desired a son; secondly, being a girl, for having inherited his plainness rather than her mother's beauty. Parents are apt to see no injustice in the fact that they are often annoyed with their offspring for possessing attributes, both of character and appearance, with which they themselves have endowed them.

The hero of Jane's childhood, the chum of her girlhood and the close friend of her maturer years, was Deryck Brand, only son of the rector of the parish, and her senior by nearly ten years. But even in their friendship, close though it was, she had never felt herself first to him. As a medical student, at home during vacations, his mother and his profession took precedence in his mind of the lonely child, whose devotion pleased him and whose strong character and original mental development interested him. Later on he married a lovely girl, as unlike Jane as one woman could possibly be to another; but still their friendship held and deepened; and now, when he was rapidly advancing to the very front rank of his profession, her appreciation of his work, and sympathetic understanding of his aims and efforts, meant more to him than even the signal mark of royal favour, of which he had lately been the recipient.

Jane Champion had no close friends amongst the women of her set. Her lonely girlhood had bred in her an absolute frankness towards herself and other people which made it difficult for her to understand or tolerate the little artificialities of society, or the trivial weaknesses of her own sex. Women to whom she had shown special kindness—and they were many—maintained an attitude of grateful admiration in her presence, and of cowardly silence in her absence when she chanced to be under discussion.

But of men friends she had many, especially among a set of young fellows just through college, of whom she made particular chums; nice lads, who wrote to her of their college and mess-room scrapes, as they would never have dreamed of doing to their own mothers. She knew perfectly well that they called her "old Jane" and "pretty Jane" and "dearest Jane" amongst themselves, but she believed in the harmlessness of their fun and the genuineness of their affection, and gave them a generous amount of her own in return.

Jane Champion happened just now to be paying one of her long visits to Overdene, and was playing golf with a boy for whom she had long had a rod in pickle on this summer afternoon when the duchess went to cut blooms in her rose-garden. Only, as Jane found out, you cannot decorously lead up to a scolding if you are very keen on golf, and go golfing with a person who is equally enthusiastic, and who all the way to the links explains exactly how he played every hole the last time he went round, and all the way back gloats over, in retrospection, the way you and he have played every hole this time.

So Jane considered her afternoon, didactically, a failure. But, in the smoking-room that night, young Cathcart explained the game all over again to a few choice spirits, and then remarked: "Old

Jane was superb! Fancy! Such a drive as that, and doing number seven in three and not talking about it! I've jolly well made up my mind to send no more bouquets to Tou-Tou. Hang it, boys! You can't see yourself at champagne suppers with a dancing-woman, when you've walked round the links, on a day like this, with the Honourable Jane. She drives like a rifle shot, and when she lofts, you'd think the ball was a swallow; and beat me three holes up and never mentioned it. By Jove, a fellow wants to have a clean bill when he shakes hands with her!"

CHAPTER III
THE SURPRISE PACKET

The sun-dial pointed to half past four o'clock. The hour of silence appeared to be over. The birds commenced twittering; and a cuckoo, in an adjacent wood, sounded his note at intervals.

The house awoke to sudden life. There was an opening and shutting of doors. Two footmen, in the mulberry and silver of the Meldrum livery, hurried down from the terrace, carrying folding tea-tables, with which they supplemented those of rustic oak standing permanently under the cedar. One, promptly returned to the house; while the other remained behind, spreading snowy cloths over each table.

The macaw awoke, stretched his wings and flapped them twice, then sidled up and down his perch, concentrating his attention upon the footman.

"Mind!" he exclaimed suddenly, in the butler's voice, as a cloth, flung on too hurriedly, fluttered to the grass.

"Hold your jaw!" said the young footman irritably, flicking the bird with the table-cloth, and then glancing furtively at the rose-garden.

"Tommy wants a gooseberry!" shrieked the macaw, dodging the table-cloth and hanging, head downwards, from his perch.

"Don't you wish you may get it?" said the footman viciously.

"Give it him, somebody," remarked Tommy, in the duchess's voice.

The footman started, and looked over his shoulder; then hurriedly told Tommy just what he thought of him, and where he wished him; cuffed him soundly, and returned to the house, followed by peals of laughter, mingled with exhortations and imprecations from the angry bird, who danced up and down on his perch until his enemy had vanished from view.

A few minutes later the tables were spread with the large variety of eatables considered necessary at an English afternoon tea; the massive silver urn and teapots gleamed on the buffet-table, behind which the old butler presided; muffins, crumpets, cakes, and every kind of sandwich supplemented the dainty little rolled slices of white and brown bread-and-butter, while heaped-up bowls of freshly gathered strawberries lent a touch of colour to the artistic effect of white and silver. When all was ready, the butler raised his hand and sounded an old Chinese gong hanging in the cedar tree. Before the penetrating boom had died away, voices were heard in the distance from all over the grounds.

Up from the river, down from the tennis courts, out from house and garden, came the duchess's guests, rejoicing in the refreshing prospect of tea, hurrying to the welcome shade of the cedar;—charming women in white, carefully guarding their complexions beneath shady hats and picturesque parasols;—delightful girls, who had long ago sacrificed complexions to comfort, and now walked across the lawn bareheaded, swinging their rackets and discussing the last hard-fought set; men in flannels, sunburned and handsome, joining in the talk and laughter; praising their partners, while remaining unobtrusively silent as to their own achievements.

They made a picturesque group as they gathered under the tree, subsiding with immense satisfaction into the low wicker chairs, or on to the soft turf, and helping themselves to what they pleased. When all were supplied with tea, coffee, or iced drinks, to their liking, conversation flowed again.

"So the duchess's concert comes off to-night," remarked some one. "I wish to goodness they would hang this tree with Chinese lanterns and, have it out here. It is too hot to face a crowded function indoors."

"Oh, that's all right," said Garth Dalmain, "I'm stage-manager, you know; and I can promise you that all the long windows opening on to the terrace shall stand wide. So no one need be in the concert-room, who prefers to stop outside. There will be a row of lounge chairs placed on the terrace near the windows. You won't see much; but you will hear, perfectly."

"Ah, but half the fun is in seeing," exclaimed one of the tennis girls. "People who have remained on the terrace will miss all the point of it afterwards when the dear duchess shows us how everybody did it. I don't care how hot it is. Book me a seat in the front row!"

"Who is the surprise packet to-night?" asked Lady Ingleby, who had arrived since luncheon.

"Velma," said Mary Strathern. "She is coming for the week-end, and delightful it will be to have her. No one but the duchess could have worked it, and no place but Overdene would have tempted her. She will sing only one song at the concert; but she is sure to break forth later on, and give us plenty. We will persuade Jane to drift to the piano accidentally and play over, just by chance, the opening bars of some of Velma's best things, and we shall soon hear the magic voice. She never can resist a perfectly played accompaniment."

"Why call Madame Velma the `surprise packet'?" asked a girl, to whom the Overdene "best parties" were a new experience.

"That, my dear," replied Lady Ingleby, "is a little joke of the duchess's. This concert is arranged for the amusement of her house party, and for the gratification and glorification of local celebrities. The whole neighbourhood is invited. None of you are asked to perform, but local celebrities are. In fact they furnish the entire programme, to their own delight, the satisfaction of their friends and relatives, and our entertainment, particularly afterwards when the duchess takes us through every item, with original notes, comments, and impersonations. Oh, Dal! Do you remember when she tucked a sheet of white writing-paper into her tea-gown for a dog collar, and took off the high-church curate nervously singing a comic song? Then at the very end, you see—and really some of it is quite good for amateurs—she trots out Velma, or some equally perfect artiste, to show them how it really can be done; and suddenly the place is full of music, and a great hush falls on the audience, and the poor complacent amateurs realise that the noise they have been making was, after all, not music; and they go dumbly home. But they have forgotten all about it by the following year; or a fresh contingent of willing performers steps into the breach. The duchess's little joke always comes off."

"The Honourable Jane does not approve of it," said young Ronald Ingram; "therefore she is generally given marching orders and departs to her next visit before the event. But no one can accompany Madame Velma so perfectly, so this time she is commanded to stay. But I doubt if the 'surprise packet' will come off with quite such a shock as usual, and I am certain the fun won't be so good afterwards. The Honourable Jane has been known to jump on the duchess for that sort of thing. She is safe to get the worst of it at the time, but it has a restraining effect afterwards."

"I think Miss Champion is quite right," said a bright-faced American girl, bravely, holding a gold spoon poised for a moment over the strawberry ice-cream with which Garth Dalmain had supplied her.

"In my country we should call it real mean to laugh, at people who had been our guests and performed in our houses."

"In your country, my dear," said Myra Ingleby, "you have no duchesses."

"Well, we supply you with quite a good few," replied the American girl calmly, and went on with her ice.

A general laugh followed; and the latest Anglo-American match came up for discussion.

"Where is the Honourable Jane?" inquired someone presently.

"Golfing with Billy," said Ronald Ingram. "Ah, here they come."

Jane's tall figure was seen, walking along the terrace, accompanied by Billy Cathcart, talking eagerly. They put their clubs away in the lower hall; then came down the lawn together to the tea-tables.

Jane wore a tailor-made coat and skirt of grey tweed, a blue and white cambric shirt, starched linen collar and cuffs, a silk tie, and a soft felt hat with a few black quills in it. She walked with the freedom of movement and swing of limb which indicate great strength and a body well under control. Her appearance was extraordinarily unlike that of all the pretty and graceful women grouped beneath the cedar tree. And yet it was in no sense masculine—or, to use a more appropriate word, mannish; for everything strong is masculine; but a woman who apes an appearance of strength which she does not possess, is mannish;—rather was it so truly feminine that she could afford to adopt a severe simplicity of attire, which suited admirably the decided plainness of her features, and the almost massive proportions of her figure.

She stepped into the circle beneath the cedar, and took one of the half-dozen places immediately vacated by the men, with the complete absence of self-consciousness which always characterised her.

"What did you go round in, Miss Champion?" inquired one of the men.

"My ordinary clothes," replied Jane; quoting Punch, and evading the question.

But Billy burst out: "She went round in—"

"Oh, be quiet, Billy," interposed Jane. "You and I are practically the only golf maniacs present. Most of these dear people are even ignorant as to who 'bogie' is, or why we should be so proud of beating him. Where is my aunt? Poor Simmons was toddling all over the place when we went in to put away our clubs, searching for her with a telegram."

"Why didn't you open it?" asked Myra.

"Because my aunt never allows her telegrams to be opened. She loves shocks; and there is always the possibility of a telegram containing startling news. She says it completely spoils it if some one else knows it first, and breaks it to her gently."

"Here comes the duchess," said Garth Dalmain, who was sitting where he could see the little gate into the rose-garden.

"Do not mention the telegram," cautioned Jane. "It would not please her that I should even know of its arrival. It would be a shame to take any of the bloom off the unexpected delight of a wire on this hot day, when nothing unusual seemed likely to happen."

They turned and looked towards the duchess as she bustled across the lawn; this quaint old figure, who had called them together; who owned the lovely place where they were spending such delightful days; and whose odd whimsicalities had been so freely discussed while they drank her tea and feasted off her strawberries. The men rose as she approached, but not quite so spontaneously as they had done for her niece.

The duchess carried a large wooden basket filled to overflowing with exquisite roses. Every bloom was perfect, and each had been cut at exactly the right moment.

CHAPTER IV
JANE VOLUNTEERS

The duchess plumped down her basket in the middle of the strawberry table.

"There, good people!" she said, rather breathlessly. "Help yourselves, and let me see you all wearing roses to-night. And the concert-room is to be a bower of roses. We will call it 'LA FETE DES ROSES.' … No, thank you, Ronnie. That tea has been made half an hour at least, and you ought to love me too well to press it upon me. Besides, I never take tea. I have a whiskey and soda when I wake from my nap, and that sustains me until dinner. Oh yes, my dear Myra, I know I came to your interesting meeting, and signed that excellent pledge 'POUR ENCOURAGER LES AUTRES'; but I drove straight to my doctor when I left your house, and he gave me a certificate to say I MUST take something when I needed it; and I always need it when I wake from my nap.... Really, Dal, it is positively wicked for any man, off the stage, to look as picturesque as you do, in that pale violet shirt, and dark violet tie, and those white flannels. If I were your grandmother I should send you in to take them off. If you turn the heads of old dowagers such as I am, what chance have all these chickens? … Hush, Tommy! That was a very naughty word! And you need not be jealous of Dal. I admire you still more. Dal, will you paint my scarlet macaw?"

The young artist, whose portraits in that year's Academy had created much interest in the artistic world, and whose violet shirt had just been so severely censured, lay back in his lounge-chair, with his arms behind his head and a gleam of amusement in his bright brown eyes.

"No, dear Duchess," he said. "I beg respectfully to decline the commission, Tommy would require a Landseer to do full justice to his attitudes and expression. Besides, it would be demoralising to an innocent and well-brought-up youth, such as you know me to be, to spend long hours in Tommy's society, listening to the remarks that sweet bird would make while I painted him. But I will tell you what I will do. I will paint you, dear Duchess, only not in that hat! Ever since I was quite a small boy, a straw hat with black ribbons tied under the chin has made me feel ill. If I yielded to my natural impulses now, I should hide my face in Miss Champion's lap, and kick and scream until you took it off. I will paint you in the black velvet gown you wore last night, with the Medici collar; and the jolly arrangement of lace and diamonds on your head. And in your hand you shall hold an antique crystal mirror, mounted in silver."

The artist half closed his eyes, and as he described his picture in a voice full of music and mystery, an attentive hush fell upon the gay group around him. When Garth Dalmain described his pictures, people saw them. When they walked into the Academy or the New Gallery the following year, they would say: "Ah, there it is! just as we saw it that day, before a stroke of it was on the canvas."

"In your left hand, you shall hold the mirror, but you shall not be looking into it; because you never look into mirrors, dear Duchess, excepting to see whether the scolding you are giving your maid, as she stands behind you, is making her cry; and whether that is why she is being so clumsy in her manipulation of pins and things. If it is, you promptly promise her a day off, to go and see her old mother; and pay her journey there and back. If it isn't, you scold her some more. Were I the maid, I should always cry, large tears warranted to show in the glass; only I should not sniff, because sniffing is so intensely aggravating; and I should be most frightfully careful that my tears did not run down your neck."

"Dal, you ridiculous CHILD!" said the duchess. "Leave off talking about my maids, and my neck, and your crocodile tears, and finish describing the portrait. What do I do, with the mirror?"

"You do not look into it," continued Garth Dalmain, meditatively; "because we KNOW that is a thing you never do. Even when you put on that hat, and tie those ribbons—Miss Champion, I wish you would hold my hand—in a bow under your chin, you don't consult the mirror. But you shall sit

with it in your left hand, your elbow resting on an Eastern table of black ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl. You will turn it from you, so that it reflects something exactly in front of you in the imaginary foreground. You will be looking at this unseen object with an expression of sublime affection. And in the mirror I will paint a vivid, brilliant, complete reflection, minute, but perfect in every detail, of your scarlet macaw on his perch. We will call it 'Reflections,' because one must always give a silly up-to-date title to pictures, and just now one nondescript word is the fashion, unless you feel it needful to attract to yourself the eye of the public, in the catalogue, by calling your picture twenty lines of Tennyson. But when the portrait goes down to posterity as a famous picture, it will figure in the catalogue of the National Gallery as 'The Duchess, the Mirror, and the Macaw.'"

"Bravo!" said the duchess, delighted. "You shall paint it, Dal, in time for next year's Academy, and we will all go and see it."

And he did. And they all went. And when they saw it they said: "Ah, of course! There it is; just as we saw it under the cedar at Overdene."

"Here comes Simmons with something on a salver," exclaimed the duchess. "How that man waddles! Why can't somebody teach him to step out? Jane! You march across this lawn like a grenadier. Can't you explain to Simmons how it's done? … Well? What is it? Ha! A telegram. Now what horrible thing can have happened? Who would like to guess? I hope it is not merely some idiot who has missed a train."

Amid a breathless and highly satisfactory silence, the duchess tore open the orange envelope.

Apparently the shock was of a thorough, though not enjoyable, kind; for the duchess, at all times highly coloured, became purple as she read, and absolutely inarticulate with indignation. Jane rose quietly, looked over her aunt's shoulder, read the long message, and returned to her seat.

"Creature!" exclaimed the duchess, at last. "Oh, creature! This comes of asking them as friends. And I had a lovely string of pearls for her, worth far more than she would have been offered, professionally, for one song. And to fail at the last minute! Oh, CREATURE!"

"Dear aunt," said Jane, "if poor Madame Velma has a sudden attack of laryngitis, she could not possibly sing a note, even had the Queen commanded her. Her telegram is full of regrets."

"Don't argue, Jane!" exclaimed the duchess, crossly. "And don't drag in the Queen, who has nothing to do with my concert or Velma's throat. I do abominate irrelevance, and you know it! WHY must she have her what—do—you—call—it, just when she was coming to sing here? In my young days people never had these new-fangled complaints. I have no patience with all this appendicitis and what not—cutting people open at every possible excuse. In my young days we called it a good old-fashioned stomach-ache, and gave them Turkey rhubarb!"

Myra Ingleby hid her face behind her garden hat; and Garth Dalmain whispered to Jane: "I do abominate irrelevance, and you know it!" But Jane shook her head at him, and refused to smile.

"Tommy wants a gooseberry!" shouted the macaw, having apparently noticed the mention of rhubarb.

"Oh, give it him, somebody!" said the worried duchess.

"Dear aunt," said Jane, "there are no gooseberries."

"Don't argue, girl!" cried the duchess, furiously; and Garth, delighted, shook his head at Jane. "When he says 'gooseberry,' he means anything GREEN, as you very well know!"

Half a dozen people hastened to Tommy with lettuce, water-cress, and cucumber sandwiches; and Garth picked one blade of grass, and handed it to Jane; with an air of anxious solicitude; but Jane ignored it.

"No answer, Simmons," said the duchess. "Why don't you go? … Oh, how that man waddles! Teach him to walk, somebody! Now the question is, What is to be done? Here is half the county coming to hear Velma, by my invitation; and Velma in London pretending to have appendicitis—no, I mean the other thing. Oh, 'drat the woman!' as that clever bird would say."

"Hold your jaw!" shouted Tommy. The duchess smiled, and consented to sit down.

"But, dear Duchess," suggested Garth in his most soothing voice, "the county does not know Madame Velma was to be here. It was a profound secret. You were to trot her out at the end. Lady Ingleby called her your 'surprise packet.'"

Myra came out from behind her garden hat, and the duchess nodded at her approvingly.

"Quite true," she said. "That was the lovely part of it. Oh, creature!"

"But, dear Duchess," pursued Garth persuasively, "if the county did not know, the county will not be disappointed. They are coming to listen to one another, and to hear themselves, and to enjoy your claret-cup and ices. All this they will do, and go away delighted, saying how cleverly the dear duchess, discovers and exploits local talent."

"Ah, ha!" said the duchess, with a gleam in the hawk eye, and a raising of the hooked nose-which Mrs. Parker Bangs of Chicago, who had met the duchess once or twice, described as "genuine Plantagenet"—"but they will go away wise in their own conceits, and satisfied with their own mediocre performances. My idea is to let them do it, and then show them how it should be done."

"But Aunt 'Gina," said Jane, gently; "surely you forget that most of these people have been to town and heard plenty of good music, Madame Velma herself most likely, and all the great singers. They know they cannot sing like a prima donna; but they do their anxious best, because you ask them. I cannot see that they require an object lesson."

"Jane," said the duchess, "for the third time this afternoon I must request you not to argue."

"Miss Champion," said Garth Dalmain, "if I were your grandmamma, I should send you to bed."

"What is to be done?" reiterated the duchess. "She was to sing THE ROSARY. I had set my heart on it. The whole decoration of the room is planned to suit that song—festoons of white roses; and a great red-cross at the back of the platform, made entirely of crimson ramblers. Jane!"

"Yes, aunt."

"Oh, don't say 'Yes, aunt,' in that senseless way! Can't you make some suggestion?"

"Drat the woman!" exclaimed Tommy, suddenly.

"Hark to that sweet bird!" cried the duchess, her good humour fully restored. "Give him a strawberry, somebody. Now, Jane, what do you suggest?"

Jane Champion was seated with her broad back half turned to her aunt, one knee crossed over the other, her large, capable hands clasped round it. She loosed her hands, turned slowly round, and looked into the keen eyes peering at her from under the mushroom hat. As she read the half-resentful, half-appealing demand in them, a slow smile dawned in her own. She waited a moment to make sure of the duchess's meaning, then said quietly: "I will sing THE ROSARY for you, in Velma's place, to-night, if you really wish it, aunt."

Had the gathering under the tree been a party of "mere people," it would have gasped. Had it been a "freak party," it would have been loud-voiced in its expressions of surprise. Being a "best party," it gave no outward sign; but a sense of blank astonishment, purely mental, was in the air. The duchess herself was the only person present who had heard Jane Champion sing.

"Have you the song?" asked her Grace of Meldrum, rising, and picking up her telegram and empty basket.

"I have," said Jane. "I spent a few hours with Madame Blanche when I was in town last month; and she, who so rarely admires these modern songs, was immensely taken with it. She sang it, and allowed me to accompany her. We spent nearly an hour over it. I obtained a copy afterwards."

"Good," said the duchess. "Then I count on you. Now I must send a sympathetic telegram to that poor dear Velma, who will be fretting at having to fail us. So 'au revoir,' good people. Remember, we dine punctually at eight o'clock. Music is supposed to begin at nine. Ronnie, be a kind boy, and carry Tommy into the hall for me. He will screech so fearfully if he sees me walk away without him. He is so very loving, dear bird!"

Silence under the cedar.

Most people were watching young Ronald, holding the stand as much at arm's length as possible; while Tommy, keeping his balance wonderfully, sidled up close to him, evidently making confidential remarks into Ronnie's terrified ear. The duchess walked on before, quite satisfied with the new turn events had taken.

One or two people were watching Jane.

"It is very brave of you," said Myra Ingleby, at length. "I would offer to play your accompaniment, dear; but I can only manage Au clair de la lune, and Three Blind Mice, with one finger."

"And I would offer to play your accompaniment, dear," said Garth Dalmain, "if you were going to sing Lassen's Allerseelen, for I play that quite beautifully with ten fingers! It is an education only to hear the way I bring out the tolling of the cemetery chapel bell right through the song. The poor thing with the bunch of purple heather can never get away from it. Even in the grand crescendo, appassionata, fortissimo, when they discover that 'in death's dark valley this is Holy Day,' I give then no holiday from that bell. I don't know what it did 'once in May.' It tolls all the time, with maddening persistence, in my accompaniment. But I have seen The Rosary, and I dare not face those chords. To begin with, you start in every known flat; and before you have gone far you have gathered unto yourself handfuls of known and unknown sharps, to which you cling, not daring to let them go, lest they should be wanted again the next moment. Alas, no! When it is a question of accompanying The Rosary, I must say, as the old farmer at the tenants' dinner the other day said to the duchess when she pressed upon him a third helping of pudding: 'Madam, I CANNOT!'"

"Don't be silly, Dal," said Jane. "You could accompany The Rosary perfectly, if I wanted it done. But, as it happens, I prefer accompanying myself."

"Ah," said Lady Ingleby, sympathetically, "I quite understand that. It would be such a relief all the time to know that if things seemed going wrong, you could stop the other part, and give yourself the note."

The only two real musicians present glanced at each other, and a gleam of amusement passed between them.

"It certainly would be useful, if necessary," said Jane.

"*I* would 'stop the other part' and 'give you the note,'" said Garth, demurely.

"I am sure you would," said Jane. "You are always so very kind. But I prefer to keep the matter in my own hands."

"You realise the difficulty of making the voice carry in a place of that size unless you can stand and face the audience?" Garth Dalmain spoke anxiously. Jane was a special friend of his, and he had a man's dislike of the idea of his chum failing in anything, publicly.

The same quiet smile dawned in Jane's eyes and passed to her lips as when she had realised that her aunt meant her to volunteer in Velma's place. She glanced around. Most of the party had wandered off in twos and threes, some to the house, others back to the river. She and Dal and Myra were practically alone. Her calm eyes were full of quiet amusement as she steadfastly met the anxious look in Garth's, and answered his question.

"Yes, I know. But the acoustic properties of the room are very perfect, and I have learned to throw my voice. Perhaps you may not know—in fact, how should you know?—but I have had the immense privilege of studying with Madame Marchesi in Paris, and of keeping up to the mark since by an occasional delightful hour with her no less gifted daughter in London. So I ought to know all there is to know about the management of a voice, if I have at all adequately availed myself of such golden opportunities."

These quiet words were Greek to Myra, conveying no more to her mind than if Jane had said: "I have been learning Tonic sol-fa." In fact, not quite so much, seeing that Lady Ingleby had herself once tried to master the Tonic sol-fa system in order to instruct her men and maids in part-singing. It was at a time when she owned a distinctly musical household. The second footman possessed a fine

barytone. The butler could "do a little bass," which is to say that, while the other parts soared to higher regions, he could stay on the bottom note if carefully placed there, and told to remain. The head housemaid sang what she called "seconds"; in other words, she followed along, slightly behind the trebles as regarded time, and a major third below them as regarded pitch. The housekeeper, a large, dark person with a fringe on her upper lip, unshaven and unashamed, produced a really remarkable effect by singing the air an octave below the trebles. Unfortunately Lady Ingleby was apt to confuse her with the butler. Myra herself was the first to admit that she had not "much ear"; but it was decidedly trying, at a moment when she dared not remove her eyes from the accompaniment of Good King Wenceslas, to have called out: "Stay where you are, Jenkins!" and then find it was Mrs. Jarvis who had been travelling upwards. But when a new footman, engaged by Lord Ingleby with no reference to his musical gifts, chanced to possess a fine throaty tenor, Myra felt she really had material with which great things might be accomplished, and decided herself to learn the Tonic sol-fa system. She easily mastered mi, re, do, and so, fa, fa, mi, because these represented the opening lines of Three Blind Mice, always a musical landmark to Myra. But when it came to the fugue-like intricacies in the theme of "They all ran after the farmer's wife," Lady Ingleby was lost without the words to cling to, and gave up the Tonic sol-fa system in despair.

So the name of the greatest teacher of singing of this age did not convey much to Myra's mind. But Garth Dalmain sat up.

"I say! No wonder you take it coolly. Why, Velma herself was a pupil of the great madame."

"That is how it happens that I know her rather well," said Jane. "I am here to-day because I was to have played her accompaniment."

"I see," said Garth. "And now you have to do both. 'Land's sake!' as Mrs. Parker Bangs says when you explain who's who at a Marlborough House garden party. But you prefer playing other people's accompaniments, to singing yourself, don't you?"

Jane's slow smile dawned again.

"I prefer singing," she said, "but accompanying is more useful."

"Of course it is," said Garth. "Heaps of people can sing a little, but very few can accompany properly."

"Jane," said Myra, her grey eyes looking out lazily from under their long black lashes, "if you have had singing lessons, and know some songs, why hasn't the duchess turned you on to sing to us before this?"

"For a sad reason," Jane replied. "You know her only son died eight years ago? He was such a handsome, talented fellow. He and I inherited our love of music from our grandfather. My cousin got into a musical set at college, studied with enthusiasm, and wanted to take it up professionally. He had promised, one Christmas vacation, to sing at a charity concert in town, and went out, when only just recovering from influenza, to fulfil this engagement. He had a relapse, double pneumonia set in, and he died in five days from heart failure. My poor aunt was frantic with grief; and since then any mention of my love of music makes her very bitter. I, too, wanted to take it up professionally, but she put her foot down heavily. I scarcely ever venture to sing or play here."

"Why not elsewhere?" asked Garth Dalmain. "We have stayed about at the same houses, and I had not the faintest idea you sang."

"I do not know," said Jane slowly. "But—music means so much to me. It is a sort of holy of holies in the tabernacle of one's inner being. And it is not easy to lift the veil."

"The veil will be lifted to-night," said Myra Ingleby.

"Yes," agreed Jane, smiling a little ruefully, "I suppose it will."

"And we shall pass in," said Garth Dalmain.

CHAPTER V
CONFIDENCES

The shadows silently lengthened on the lawn.

The home-coming rooks circled and cawed around the tall elm trees.

The sun-dial pointed to six o'clock.

Myra Ingleby rose and stood with the slanting rays of the sun full in her eyes, her arms stretched over her head. The artist noted every graceful line of her willowy figure.

"Ah, bah!" she yawned. "It is so perfect out here, and I must go in to my maid. Jane, be advised in time. Do not ever begin facial massage. You become a slave to it, and it takes up hours of your day. Look at me."

They were both looking already. Myra was worth looking at.

"For ordinary dressing purposes, I need not have gone in until seven; and now I must lose this last, perfect hour."

"What happens?" asked Jane. "I know nothing of the process."

"I can't go into details," replied Lady Ingleby, "but you know how sweet I have looked all day? Well, if I did not go to my maid now, I should look less sweet by the end of dinner, and at the close of the evening I should appear ten years older."

"You would always look sweet," said Jane, with frank sincerity; "and why mind looking the age you are?"

"My dear, 'a man is as old as he feels; a woman is as old as she looks,'" quoted Myra.

"I FEEL just seven," said Garth.

"And you LOOK seventeen," laughed Myra.

"And I AM twenty-seven," retorted Garth; "so the duchess should not call me 'a ridiculous child.' And, dear lady, if curtailing this mysterious process is going to make you one whit less lovely to-night, I do beseech you to hasten to your maid, or you will spoil my whole evening. I shall burst into tears at dinner, and the duchess hates scenes, as you very well know!"

Lady Ingleby flapped him with her garden hat as she passed.

"Be quiet, you ridiculous child!" she said. "You had no business to listen to what I was saying to Jane. You shall paint me this autumn. And after that I will give up facial massage, and go abroad, and come back quite old."

She flung this last threat over her shoulder as she trailed away across the lawn.

"How lovely she is!" commented Garth, gazing after her. "How much of that was true, do you suppose, Miss Champion?"

"I have not the slightest idea," replied Jane. "I am completely ignorant on the subject of facial massage."

"Not much, I should think," continued Garth, "or she would not have told us."

"Ah, you are wrong there," replied Jane, quickly. "Myra is extraordinarily honest, and always inclined to be frank about herself and her foibles. She had a curious upbringing. She is one of a large family, and was always considered the black sheep, not so much by her brothers and sisters, as by her mother. Nothing she was, or said, or did, was ever right. When Lord Ingleby met her, and I suppose saw her incipient possibilities, she was a tall, gawky girl, with lovely eyes, a sweet, sensitive mouth, and a what-on-earth-am-I-going-to-do-next expression on her face. He was twenty years her senior, but fell most determinedly in love with her and, though her mother pressed upon him all her other daughters in turn, he would have Myra or nobody. When he proposed to her it was impossible at first to make her understand what he meant. His meaning dawned on her at length, and he was not kept waiting long for her answer. I have often heard him tease her about it. She looked at him

with an adorable smile, her eyes brimming over with tears, and said: 'Why, of course. I'll marry you GRATEFULLY, and I think it is perfectly sweet of you to like me. But what a blow for mamma!' They were married with as little delay as possible, and he took her off to Paris, Italy, and Egypt, had six months abroad, and brought her back—this! I was staying with them once, and her mother was also there. We were sitting in the morning room,—no men, just half a dozen women,—and her mother began finding fault about something, and said: 'Has not Lord Ingleby often told you of it?' Myra looked up in her sweet, lazy way and answered: 'Dear mamma, I know it must seem strange to you, but, do you know, my husband thinks everything I do perfect.' 'Your husband is a fool!' snapped her mother. 'From YOUR point of view, dear mamma,' said Myra, sweetly."

"Old curmudgeon!" remarked Garth. "Why are people of that sort allowed to be called 'mothers'? We, who have had tender, perfect mothers, would like to make it law that the other kind should always be called 'she-parents,' or 'female progenitors,' or any other descriptive title, but not profane the sacred name of mother!"

Jane was silent. She knew the beautiful story of Garth's boyhood with his widowed mother. She knew his passionate adoration of her sainted memory. She liked him best when she got a glimpse beneath the surface, and did not wish to check his mood by reminding him that she herself had never even lisped that name.

Garth rose from his chair and stretched his slim figure in the slanting sun-rays, much as Myra had done. Jane looked at him. As is often the case with plain people, great physical beauty appealed to her strongly. She only allowed to that appeal its right proportion in her estimation of her friends. Garth Dalmain by no means came first among her particular chums. He was older than most of them, and yet in some ways younger than any, and his remarkable youthfulness of manner and exuberance of spirits sometimes made him appear foolish to Jane, whose sense of humour was of a more sedate kind. But of the absolute perfection of his outward appearance, there was no question; and Jane looked at him now, much as his own mother might have looked, with honest admiration in her kind eyes.

Garth, notwithstanding the pale violet shirt and dark violet tie, was quite unconscious of his own appearance; and, dazzled by the golden sunlight, was also unconscious of Jane's look.

"Oh, I say, Miss Champion!" he cried, boyishly. "Isn't it nice that they have all gone in? I have been wanting a good jaw with you. Really, when we all get together we do drivel sometimes, to keep the ball rolling. It is like patting up air-balls; and very often they burst, and one realises that an empty, shrivelled little skin is all that is left after most conversations. Did you ever buy air-balls at Brighton? Do you remember the wild excitement of seeing the man coming along the parade, with a huge bunch of them—blue, green, red, white, and yellow, all shining in the sun? And one used to wonder how he ever contrived to pick them all up—I don't know how!—and what would happen if he put them all down. I always knew exactly which one I wanted, and it was generally on a very inside string and took a long time to disentangle. And how maddening it was if the grown-ups grew tired of waiting, and walked on with the penny. Only I would rather have had none, than not have the one on which I had fixed my heart. Wouldn't you?"

"I never bought air-balls at Brighton," replied Jane, without enthusiasm. Garth was feeling seven again, and Jane was feeling bored.

For once he seemed conscious of this. He took his coat from the back of the chair where he had hung it, and put it on.

"Come along, Miss Champion," he said; "I am so tired of doing nothing. Let us go down to the river and find a boat or two. Dinner is not until eight o'clock, and I am certain you can dress, even for the ROLE of Velma, in half an hour. I have known you do it in ten minutes, at a pinch. There is ample time for me to row you within sight of the minster, and we can talk as we go. Ah, fancy! the grey old minster with this sunset behind it, and a field of cowslips in the foreground!"

But Jane did not rise.

"My dear Dal," she said, "you would not feel much enthusiasm for the minster or the sunset, after you had pulled my twelve stone odd up the river. You would drop exhausted among the cowslips. Surely you might know by now that I am not the sort of person to be told off to sit in the stern of a tiny skiff and steer. If I am in a boat, I like to row; and if I row, I prefer rowing stroke. But I do not want to row now, because I have been playing golf the whole afternoon. And you know perfectly well it would be no pleasure to you to have to gaze at me all the way up and all the way down the river; knowing all the time, that I was mentally criticising your stroke and marking the careless way you feathered."

Garth sat down, lay back in his chair, with his arms behind his sleek dark head, and looked at her with his soft shining eyes, just as he had looked at the duchess.

"How cross you are, old chap," he said, gently. "What is the matter?"

Jane laughed and held out her hand. "Oh, you dear boy! I think you have the sweetest temper in the world. I won't be cross any more. The truth is, I hate the duchess's concerts, and I don't like being the duchess's 'surprise-packet.'"

"I see," said Garth, sympathetically. "But, that being so, why did you offer?"

"Ah, I had to," said Jane. "Poor old dear! She so rarely asks me anything, and her eyes besought. Don't you know how one longs to have something to do for some one who belongs to one? I would black her boots if she wished it. But it is so hard to stay here, week after week, and be kept at arm's length. This one thing she asked of me, and her proud old eyes pleaded. Could I refuse?"

Garth was all sympathy. "No, dear," he said thoughtfully; "of course you couldn't. And don't bother over that silly joke about the 'surprise packet.' You see, you won't be that. I have no doubt you sing vastly better than most of them, but they will not realise it. It takes a Velma to make such people as these sit up. They will think THE ROSARY a pretty song, and give you a mild clap, and there the thing will end. So don't worry."

Jane sat and considered this. Then: "Dal," she said, "I do hate singing before that sort of audience. It is like giving them your soul to look at, and you don't want them to see it. It seems indecent. To my mind, music is the most REVEALING thing in the world. I shiver when I think of that song, and yet I daren't do less than my best. When the moment comes, I shall live in the song, and forget the audience. Let me tell you a lesson I once had from Madame Blanche. I was singing Bemberg's CHANT HINDOU, the passionate prayer of an Indian woman to Brahma. I began: 'BRAHMA! DIEU DES CROYANTS,' and sang it as I might have sung 'DO, RE, MI.' Brahma was nothing to me. 'Stop!' cried Madame Blanche in her most imperious manner. 'Ah, vous Anglais! What are you doing? BRAHMA, c'est un Dieu! He may not be YOUR God. He may not be MY God. But he is somebody's God. He is the God of the song. Ecoutez!' And she lifted her head and sang: 'Brahma! Dieu des croyants! Maitre des cites saintes!' with her beautiful brow illumined, and a passion of religious fervour which thrilled one's soul. It was a lesson I never forgot. I can honestly say I have never sung a song tamely, since."

"Fine!" said Garth Dalmain. "I like enthusiasm in every branch of art. I never care to paint a portrait, unless I adore the woman I am painting."

Jane smiled. The conversation was turning exactly the way she had hoped eventually to lead it.

"Dal, dear," she said, "you adore so many in turn, that we old friends, who have your real interest at heart, fear you will never adore to any definite purpose."

Garth laughed. "Oh bother!" he said. "Are you like all the rest? Do you also think adoration and admiration must necessarily mean marriage. I should have expected you to take a saner and more masculine view."

"My dear boy," said Jane, "your friends have decided that you need a wife. You are alone in the world. You have a lovely home. You are in a fair way to be spoiled by all the silly women who run after you. Of course we are perfectly aware that your wife must have every incomparable beauty under the sun united in her own exquisite person. But each new divinity you see and paint apparently

fulfils, for the time being, this wondrous ideal; and, perhaps, if you wedded one, instead of painting her, she might continue permanently to fulfil it."

Garth considered this in silence, his level brows knitted. At last he said: "Beauty is so much a thing of the surface. I see it, and admire it. I desire it, and paint it. When I have painted it, I have made it my own, and somehow I find I have done with it. All the time I am painting a woman, I am seeking for her soul. I want to express it on my canvas; and do you know, Miss Champion, I find that a lovely woman does not always have a lovely soul."

Jane was silent. The last things she wished to discuss were other women's souls.

"There is just one who seems to me perfect," continued Garth. "I am to paint her this autumn. I believe I shall find her soul as exquisite as her body."

"And she is—?" inquired Jane.

"Lady Brand."

"Flower!" exclaimed Jane. "Are YOU so taken with Flower?"

"Ah, she is lovely," said Garth, with reverent enthusiasm. "It positively is not right for any one to be so absolutely flawlessly lovely. It makes me ache. Do you know that feeling, Miss Champion, of perfect loveliness making you ache?"

"No, I don't," said Jane, shortly. "And I do not think other people's wives ought to have that effect upon you."

"My dear old chap," exclaimed Garth, astonished; "it has nothing to do with wives or no wives. A wood of bluebells in morning sunshine would have precisely the same effect. I ache to paint her. When I have painted her and really done justice to that matchless loveliness as I see it, I shall feel all right. At present I have only painted her from memory; but she is to sit to me in October."

"From memory?" questioned Jane.

"Yes, I paint a great deal from memory. Give me one look of a certain kind at a face, let me see it at a moment which lets one penetrate beneath the surface, and I can paint that face from memory weeks after. Lots of my best studies have been done that way. Ah, the delight of it! Beauty—the worship of beauty is to me a religion."

"Rather a godless form of religion," suggested Jane.

"Ah no," said Garth reverently. "All true beauty comes from God, and leads back to God. 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.' I once met an old freak who said all sickness came from the devil. I never could believe that, for my mother was an invalid during the last years of her life, and I can testify that her sickness was a blessing to many, and borne to the glory of God. But I am, convinced all true beauty is God-given, and that is why the worship of beauty is to me a religion. Nothing bad was ever truly beautiful; nothing good is ever really ugly."

Jane smiled as she watched him, lying back in the golden sunlight, the very personification of manly beauty. The absolute lack of self-consciousness, either for himself or for her, which allowed him to talk thus to the plainest woman of his acquaintance, held a vein of humour which diverted Jane. It appealed to her more than buying coloured air-balls, or screaming because the duchess wore a mushroom hat.

"Then are plain people to be denied their share of goodness, Dal?" she asked.

"Plainness is not ugliness," replied Garth Dalmain simply. "I learned that when quite a small boy. My mother took me to hear a famous preacher. As he sat on the platform during the preliminaries he seemed to me quite the ugliest man I had ever seen. He reminded me of a grotesque gorilla, and I dreaded the moment when he should rise up and face us and give out a text. It seemed to me there ought to be bars between, and that we should want to throw nuts and oranges. But when he rose to speak, his face was transfigured. Goodness and inspiration shone from it, making it as the face of an angel. I never again thought him ugly. The beauty of his soul shone through, transfiguring his body. Child though I was, I could differentiate even then between ugliness and plainness. When he sat down

at the close of his magnificent sermon, I no longer thought him a complicated form of chimpanzee. I remembered the divine halo of his smile. Of course his actual plainness of feature remained. It was not the sort of face one could have wanted to live with, or to have day after day opposite to one at table. But then one was not called to that sort of discipline, which would have been martyrdom to me. And he has always stood to my mind since as a proof of the truth that goodness is never ugly; and that divine love and aspiration shining through the plainest features may redeem them temporarily into beauty; and, permanently, into a thing one loves to remember."

"I see," said Jane. "It must have often helped you to a right view to have realised that so long ago. But now let us return to the important question of the face which you ARE to have daily opposite you at table. It cannot be Lady Brand's, nor can it be Myra's; but, you know, Dal, a very lovely one is being suggested for the position."

"No names, please," said Garth, quickly. "I object to girls' names being mentioned in this sort of conversation."

"Very well, dear boy. I understand and respect your objection. You have made her famous already by your impressionist portrait of her, and I hear you are to do a more elaborate picture 'in the fall.' Now, Dal, you know you admire her immensely. She is lovely, she is charming, she hails from the land whose women, when they possess charm, unite with it a freshness and a piquancy which place them beyond compare. In some ways you are so unique yourself that you ought to have a wife with a certain amount of originality. Now, I hardly know how far the opinion of your friends would influence you in such a matter, but you may like to hear how fully they approve your very open allegiance to—shall we say—the beautiful 'Stars and Stripes'?"

Garth Dalmain took out his cigarette case, carefully selected a cigarette, and sat with it between his fingers in absorbed contemplation.

"Smoke," said Jane.

"Thanks," said Garth. He struck a match and very deliberately lighted his cigarette. As he flung away the vesta the breeze caught it and it fell on the lawn, flaming brightly. Garth sprang up and extinguished it, then drew his chair more exactly opposite to Jane's and lay back, smoking meditatively, and watching the little rings he blew, mount into the cedar branches, expand, fade, and vanish.

Jane was watching him. The varied and characteristic ways in which her friends lighted and smoked their cigarettes always interested Jane. There were at least a dozen young men of whom she could have given the names upon hearing a description of their method. Also, she had learned from Deryck Brand the value of silences in an important conversation, and the art of not weakening a statement by a postscript.

At last Garth spoke.

"I wonder why the smoke is that lovely pale blue as it curls up from the cigarette, and a greyish-white if one blows it out."

Jane knew it was because it had become impregnated with moisture, but she did not say so, having no desire to contribute her quota of pats to this air-ball, or to encourage the superficial workings of his mind just then. She quietly awaited the response to her appeal to his deeper nature which she felt certain would be forthcoming. Presently it came.

"It is awfully good of you, Miss Champion, to take the trouble to think all this and to say it to me. May I prove my gratitude by explaining for once where my difficulty lies? I have scarcely defined it to myself, and yet I believe I can express it to you." Another long silence. Garth smoked and pondered.

Jane waited. It was a very comprehending, very companionable silence. Garth found himself parodying the last lines of an old sixteenth-century song:

"Then ever pray that heaven may send

Such weeds, such chairs, and such a friend."

Either the cigarette, or the chair, or Jane, or perhaps all three combined were producing in him a sublime sense of calm, and rest, and well-being; an uplifting of spirit which made all good things seem better; all difficult things, easy; and all ideals, possible. The silence, like the sunset, was golden; but at last he broke it.

"Two women—the only two women who have ever really been in my life—form for me a standard below which I cannot fall,—one, my mother, a sacred and ideal memory; the other, old Margery Graem, my childhood's friend and nurse, now my housekeeper and general tender and mender. Her faithful heart and constant remembrance help to keep me true to the ideal of that sweet presence which faded from beside me when I stood on the threshold of manhood. Margery lives at Castle Gleneesh. When I return home, the sight which first meets my eyes as the hall door opens is old Margery in her black satin apron, lawn kerchief, and lavender ribbons. I always feel seven then, and I always hug her. You, Miss Champion, don't like me when I feel seven; but Margery does. Now, this is what I want you to realise. When I bring a bride to Gleneesh and present her to Margery, the kind old eyes will try to see nothing but good; the faithful old heart will yearn to love and serve. And yet I shall know she knows the standard, just as I know it; I shall know she remembers the ideal of gentle, tender, Christian womanhood, just as I remember it; and I must not, I dare not, fall short. Believe me, Miss Champion, more than once, when physical attraction has been strong, and I have been tempted in the worship of the outward loveliness to disregard or forget the essentials,—the things which are unseen but eternal,—then, all unconscious of exercising any such influence, old Margery's clear eyes look into mine, old Margery's mittened hand seems to rest upon my coat sleeve, and the voice which has guided me from infancy, says, in gentle astonishment: `Is this your choice, Master Garthie, to fill my dear lady's place?' No doubt, Miss Champion, it will seem almost absurd to you when you think of our set and our sentiments, and the way we racket round that I should sit here on the duchess's lawn and confess that I have been held back from proposing marriage to the women I have most admired, because of what would have been my old nurse's opinion of them! But you must remember her opinion is formed by a memory, and that memory is the memory of my dead mother. Moreover, Margery voices my best self, and expresses my own judgment when it is not blinded by passion or warped by my worship of the beautiful. Not that Margery would disapprove of loveliness; in fact, she would approve of nothing else for me, I know very well. But her penetration rapidly goes beneath the surface. According to one of Paul's sublime paradoxes, she looks at the things that are not seen. It seems queer that I can tell you all this, Miss Champion, and really it is the first time I have actually formulated it in my own mind. But I think it so extremely friendly of you to have troubled to give me good advice in the matter."

Garth Dalmain ceased speaking, and the silence which followed suddenly assumed alarming proportions, seeming to Jane like a high fence which she was vainly trying to scale. She found herself mentally rushing hither and thither, seeking a gate or any possible means of egress. And still she was confronted by the difficulty of replying adequately to the totally unexpected. And what added to her dumbness was the fact that she was infinitely touched by Garth's confession; and when Jane was deeply moved speech always became difficult. That this young man—adored by all the girls for his good looks and delightful manners; pursued for his extreme eligibility by mothers and chaperons; famous already in the world of art; flattered, courted, sought after in society—should calmly admit that the only woman really left IN his life was his old nurse, and that her opinion and expectations held him back from a worldly, or unwise marriage, touched Jane deeply, even while in her heart she smiled at what their set would say could they realise the situation. It revealed Garth in a new light; and suddenly Jane understood him, as she had not understood him before.

And yet the only reply she could bring herself to frame was: "I wish I knew old Margery."

Garth's brown eyes flashed with pleasure.

"Ah, I wish you did," he said. "And I should like you to see Castle Gleneesh. You would enjoy the view from the terrace, sheer into the gorge, and away across the purple hills. And I think you would like the pine woods and the moor. I say, Miss Champion, why should not *I* get up a 'best party' in September, and implore the duchess to come and chaperon it? And then you could come, and any one else you would like asked. And—and, perhaps—we might ask—the beautiful 'Stars and Stripes,' and her aunt, Mrs. Parker Bangs of Chicago; and then we should see what Margery thought of her!"

"Delightful!" said Jane. "I would come with pleasure. And really, Dal, I think that girl has a sweet nature. Could you do better? The exterior is perfect, and surely the soul is there. Yes, ask us all, and see what happens."

"I will," cried Garth, delighted. "And what will Margery think of Mrs. Parker Bangs?"

"Never mind," said Jane decidedly. "When you marry the niece, the aunt goes back to Chicago."

"And I wish her people were not millionaires."

"That can't be helped," said Jane. "Americans are so charming, that we really must not mind their money."

"I wish Miss Lister and her aunt were here," remarked Garth. "But they are to be at Lady Ingleby's, where I am due next Tuesday. Do you come on there, Miss Champion?"

"I do," replied Jane. "I go to the Brands for a few days on Tuesday, but I have promised Myra to turn up at Shenstone for the week-end. I like staying there. They are such a harmonious couple."

"Yes," said Garth, "but no one could help being a harmonious couple, who had married Lady Ingleby."

"What grammar!" laughed Jane. "But I know what you mean, and I am glad you think so highly of Myra. She is a dear! Only do make haste and paint her and get her off your mind, so as to be free for Pauline Lister."

The sun-dial pointed to seven o'clock. The rooks had circled round the elms and dropped contentedly into their nests.

"Let us go in," said Jane, rising. "I am glad we have had this talk," she added, as he walked beside her across the lawn.

"Yes," said Garth. "Air-balls weren't in it! It was a football this time—good solid leather. And we each kicked one goal,—a tie, you know. For your advice went home to me, and I think my reply showed you the true lie of things; eh, Miss Champion?"

He was feeling seven again; but Jane saw him now through old Margery's glasses, and it did not annoy her.

"Yes," she said, smiling at him with her kind, true eyes; "we will consider it a tie, and surely it will prove a tie to our friendship. Thank you, Dal, for all you have told me."

Arrived in her room, Jane found she had half an hour to spare before dressing. She took out her diary. Her conversation with Garth Dalmain seemed worth recording, particularly his story of the preacher whose beauty of soul redeemed the ugliness of his body. She wrote it down verbatim.

Then she rang for her maid, and dressed for dinner, and the concert which should follow.

CHAPTER VI
THE VEIL IS LIFTED

"MISS CHAMPION! Oh, here you are! Your turn next, please. The last item of the local programme is in course of performance, after which the duchess explains Velma's laryngitis—let us hope she will not call it 'appendicitis'—and then I usher you up. Are you ready?"

Garth Dalmain, as master of ceremonies, had sought Jane Champion on the terrace, and stood before her in the soft light of the hanging Chinese lanterns. The crimson rambler in his button-hole, and his red silk socks, which matched it, lent an artistic touch of colour to the conventional black and white of his evening clothes.

Jane looked up from the comfortable depths of her wicker chair; then smiled at his anxious face.

"I am ready," she said, and rising, walked beside him. "Has it gone well?" she asked. "Is it a good audience?"

"Packed," replied Garth, "and the duchess has enjoyed herself. It has been funnier than usual. But now comes the event of the evening. I say, where is your score?"

"Thanks," said Jane. "I shall play it from memory. It obviates the bother of turning over."

They passed into the concert-room and stood behind screens and a curtain, close to the half-dozen steps leading, from the side, up on to the platform.

"Oh, hark to the duchess!" whispered Garth. "My NIECE, JANE CHAMPION, HAS KINDLY CONSENTED TO STEP INTO THE BREACH—' Which means that you will have to step up on to that platform in another half-minute. Really it would be kinder to you if she said less about Velma. But never mind; they are prepared to like anything. There! APPENDICITIS! I told you so. Poor Madame Velma! Let us hope it won't get into the local papers. Oh, goodness! She is going to enlarge on new-fangled diseases. Well, it gives us a moment's breathing space.... I say, Miss Champion, I was chaffing this afternoon about sharps and flats. I can play that accompaniment for you if you like. No? Well, just as you think best. But remember, it takes a lot of voice to make much effect in this concert-room, and the place is crowded. Now—the duchess has done. Come on. Mind the bottom step. Hang it all! How dark it is behind this curtain!"

Garth gave her his hand, and Jane mounted the steps and passed into view of the large audience assembled in the Overdene concert-room. Her tall figure seemed taller than usual as she walked alone across the rather high platform. She wore a black evening gown of soft material, with old lace at her bosom and one string of pearls round her neck. When she appeared, the audience gazed at her and applauded doubtfully. Velma's name on the programme had raised great expectations; and here was Miss Champion, who certainly played very nicely, but was not supposed to be able to sing, volunteering to sing Velma's song. A more kindly audience would have cheered her to the echo, voicing its generous appreciation of her effort, and sanguine expectation of her success. This audience expressed its astonishment, in the dubiousness of its faint applause.

Jane smiled at them good-naturedly; sat down at the piano, a Bechstein grand; glanced at the festoons of white roses and the cross of crimson ramblers; then, without further preliminaries, struck the opening chord and commenced to sing.

The deep, perfect voice thrilled through the room.

A sudden breathless hush fell upon the audience.

Each syllable penetrated the silence, borne on a tone so tender and so amazingly sweet, that casual hearts stood still and marvelled at their own emotion; and those who felt deeply already, responded with a yet deeper thrill to the magic of that music.

"The hours I spent with thee, dear heart,

Are as a string of pearls to me;
I count them over, ev'ry one apart,
My rosary,—my rosary."

Softly, thoughtfully, tenderly, the last two words were breathed into the silence, holding a world of reminiscence—a large-hearted woman's faithful remembrance of tender moments in the past.

The listening crowd held its breath. This was not a song. This was the throbbing of a heart; and it throbbed in tones of such sweetness, that tears started unbidden.

Then the voice, which had rendered the opening lines so quietly, rose in a rapid crescendo of quivering pain.

"Each hour a pearl, each pearl a prayer,
To still a heart in absence wrung;
I tell each bead unto the end, and there—
A cross is hung!"

The last four words were given with a sudden power and passion which electrified the assembly. In the pause which followed, could be heard the tension of feeling produced. But in another moment the quiet voice fell soothingly, expressing a strength of endurance which would fail in no crisis, nor fear to face any depths of pain; yet gathering to itself a poignancy of sweetness, rendered richer by the discipline of suffering.

"O memories that bless and burn!
O barren gain and bitter loss!
I kiss each bead, and strive at last to learn
To kiss the cross … to kiss the cross."

Only those who have heard Jane sing THE ROSARY can possibly realise how she sang "I KISS EACH BEAD." The lingering retrospection in each word; breathed out a love so womanly, so beautiful, so tender, that her identity was forgotten—even by those in the audience who knew her best—in the magic of her rendering of the song.

The accompaniment, which opens with a single chord, closes with a single note.

Jane struck it softly, lingeringly; then rose, turned from the piano, and was leaving the platform, when a sudden burst of wild applause broke from the audience. Jane hesitated, paused, looked at her aunt's guests as if almost surprised to find them there. Then the slow smile dawned in her eyes and passed to her lips. She stood in the centre of the platform for a moment, awkwardly, almost shyly; then moved on as men's voices began to shout "Encore! 'core!" and left the platform by the side staircase.

But there, behind the scenes, in the semi-darkness of screens and curtains, a fresh surprise awaited Jane, more startling than the enthusiastic tumult of her audience.

At the foot of the staircase stood Garth Dalmain. His face was absolutely colourless, and his eyes shone out from it like burning stars. He remained motionless until she stepped from the last stair and stood close to him. Then with a sudden movement he caught her by the shoulders and turned her round.

"Go back!" he said, and the overmastering need quivering in his voice drew Jane's eyes to his in mute astonishment. "Go back at once and sing it all over again, note for note, word for word, just as before. Ah, don't stand here waiting! Go back now! Go back at once! Don't you know that you MUST?"

Jane looked into those shining eyes. Something she saw in them excused the brusque command of his tone. Without a word, she quietly mounted the steps and walked across the platform to the

piano. People were still applauding, and redoubled their demonstrations of delight as she appeared; but Jane took her seat at the instrument without giving them a thought.

She was experiencing a very curious and unusual sensation. Never before in her whole life had she obeyed a peremptory command. In her childhood's days, Fraulein and Miss Jebb soon found out that they could only obtain their desires by means of carefully worded requests, or pathetic appeals to her good feelings and sense of right. An unreasonable order, or a reasonable one unexplained, promptly met with a point-blank refusal. And this characteristic still obtained, though modified by time; and even the duchess, as a rule, said "please" to Jane.

But now a young man with a white face and blazing eyes had unceremoniously swung her round, ordered her up the stairs, and commanded her to sing a song over again, note for note, word for word, and she was meekly going to obey.

As she took her seat, Jane suddenly made up her mind not to sing The Rosary again. She had many finer songs in her repertoire. The audience expected another. Why should she disappoint those expectations because of the imperious demands of a very highly excited boy?

She commenced the magnificent prelude to Handel's "Where'er you walk," but, as she played it, her sense of truth and justice intervened. She had not come back to sing again at the bidding of a highly excited boy, but of a deeply moved man; and his emotion was of no ordinary kind. That Garth Dalmain should have been so moved as to forget even momentarily his punctilious courtesy of manner, was the highest possible tribute to her art and to her song. While she played the Handel theme—and played it so that a whole orchestra seemed marshalled upon the key-board under those strong, firm finger—she suddenly realised, though scarcely understanding it, the MUST of which Garth had spoken, and made up her mind to yield to its necessity. So; when the opening bars were ended, instead of singing the grand song from Semele she paused for a moment; struck once more The Rosary's; opening chord; and did as Garth had bidden her to do.

"The hours I spent with thee, dear heart,
Are as a string of pearls to me;
I count them over, ev'ry one apart,
My rosary,—my rosary.
"Each hour a pearl, each pearl a prayer,
To still a heart in absence wrung;
I tell each bead unto the end, and there—
A cross is hung!
"O memories that bless and burn!
O barren gain and bitter loss!
I kiss each bead, and strive at last to learn
To kiss the cross … to kiss the cross."

When Jane left the platform, Garth was still standing motionless at the foot of the stairs. His face was just as white as before, but his eyes had lost that terrible look of unshed tears, which had sent her back, at his bidding, without a word of question or remonstrance. A wonderful light now shone in them; a light of adoration, which touched Jane's heart because she had never before seen anything quite like it. She smiled as she came slowly down the steps, and held out both hands to him with an unconscious movement of gracious friendliness. Garth stepped close to the bottom of the staircase and took them in his, while she was still on the step above him.

For a moment he did not speak. Then in a low voice, vibrant with emotion: "My God!" he said, "Oh, my God!"

"Hush," said Jane; "I never like to hear that name spoken lightly, Dal."

"Spoken lightly!" he exclaimed. "No speaking lightly would be possible for me to-night. 'Every perfect gift is from above.' When words fail me to speak of the gift, can you wonder if I apostrophise the Giver?"

Jane looked steadily into his shining eyes, and a smile of pleasure illumined her own. "So you liked my song?" she said.

"Liked—liked your song?" repeated Garth, a shade of perplexity crossing his face. "I do not know whether I liked your song."

"Then why this flattering demonstration?" inquired Jane, laughing.

"Because," said Garth, very low, "you lifted the veil, and I—I passed within."

He was still holding her hands in his; and, as he spoke the last two words, he turned them gently over and, bending, kissed each palm with an indescribably tender reverence; then, loosing them, stood on one side, and Jane went out on to the terrace alone.

CHAPTER VII
GARTH FINDS HIS ROSARY

Jane spent but a very few minutes in the drawing-room that evening. The fun in progress there was not to her taste, and the praises heaped upon herself annoyed her. Also she wanted the quiet of her own room in order to think over that closing episode of the concert, which had taken place between herself and Garth, behind the scenes. She did not feel certain how to take it. She was conscious that it held an element which she could not fathom, and Garth's last act had awakened in herself feelings which she did not understand. She extremely disliked the way in which he had kissed her hands; and yet he had put into the action such a passion of reverent worship that it gave her a sense of consecration—of being, as it were, set apart to minister always to the hearts of men in that perfect gift of melody which should uplift and ennoble. She could not lose the sensation of the impress of his lips upon the palms of her hands. It was as if he had left behind something tangible and abiding. She caught herself looking at them anxiously once or twice, and the third time this happened she determined to go to her room.

The duchess was at the piano, completely hidden from view by nearly the whole of her house party, crowding round in fits of delighted laughter. Ronnie had just broken through from the inmost circle to fetch an antimacassar; and Billy, to dash to the writing-table for a sheet of note-paper. Jane knew the note-paper meant a clerical dog collar, and she concluded something had been worn which resembled an antimacassar.

She turned rather wearily and moved towards the door. Quiet and unobserved though her retreat had been, Garth was at the door before her. She did not know how he got there; for, as she turned to leave the room, she had seen his sleek head close to Myra Ingleby's on the further side of the duchess's crowd. He opened the door and Jane passed out. She felt equally desirous of saying two things to him,—either: "How dared you behave in so unconventional a way?" or: "Tell me just what you want me to do, and I will do it."

She said neither.

Garth followed her into the hall, lighted a candle, and threw the match at Tommy; then handed her the silver candlestick. He was looking absurdly happy. Jane felt annoyed with him for parading this gladness, which she had unwittingly caused and in which she had no share. Also she felt she must break this intimate silence. It was saying so much which ought not to be said, since it could not be spoken. She took her candle rather aggressively and turned upon the second step.

"Good-night, Dal," she said. "And do you know that you are missing the curate?"

He looked up at her. His eyes shone in the light of her candle.

"No," he said. "I am neither missing nor missed. I was only waiting in there until you went up. I shall not go back. I am going out into the park now to breathe in the refreshing coolness of the night breeze. And I am going to stand under the oaks and tell my beads. I did not know I had a rosary, until to-night, but I have—I have!"

"I should say you have a dozen," remarked Jane, dryly.

"Then you would be wrong," replied Garth. "I have just one. But it has many hours. I shall be able to call them all to mind when I get out there alone. I am going to 'count each pearl.'"

"How about the cross?" asked Jane.

"I have not reached that yet," answered Garth. "There is no cross to my rosary."

"I fear there is a cross to every true rosary, Dal," said Jane gently, "and I also fear it will go hard with you when you find yours."

But Garth was confident and unafraid.

"When I find mine," he said, "I hope I shall be able to"– Involuntarily Jane looked at her hands. He saw the look and smiled, though he had the grace to colour beneath his tan,—"to FACE the cross," he said.

Jane turned and began to mount the stairs; but Garth arrested her with an eager question.

"Just one moment, Miss Champion! There is something I want to ask you. May I? Will you think me impertinent, presuming, inquisitive?"

"I have no doubt I shall," said Jane. "But I am thinking you all sorts of unusual things to-night; so three adjectives more or less will not matter much. You may ask."

"Miss Champion, have YOU a rosary?"

Jane looked at him blankly; then suddenly understood the drift of his question.

"My dear boy, NO!" she said. "Thank goodness, I have kept clear of 'memories that bless and burn.' None of these things enter into my rational and well-ordered life, and I have no wish that they should."

"Then," deliberated Garth, "how came you to sing THE ROSARY as if each line were your own experience; each joy or pain a thing—long passed, perhaps—but your own?"

"Because," explained Jane, "I always live in a song when I sing it. Did I not tell you the lesson I learned over the CHANT HINDOU? Therefore I had a rosary undoubtedly when I was singing that song to-night. But, apart from that, in the sense you mean, no, thank goodness, I have none."

Garth mounted two steps, bringing his eyes on a level with the candlestick.

"But IF you cared," he said, speaking very low, "that is how you would care? that is as you would feel?"

Jane considered. "Yes," she said, "IF I cared, I suppose I should care just so, and feel as I felt during those few minutes."

"Then it was YOU in the song, although the circumstances are not yours?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Jane replied, "if we can consider ourselves apart from our circumstances. But surely this is rather an unprofitable 'air-ball.' Goodnight, 'Master Garthie!'"

"I say, Miss Champion! Just one thing more. Will you sing for me to-morrow? Will you come to the music-room and sing all the lovely things I want to hear? And will you let me play a few of your accompaniments? Ah, promise you will come. And promise to sing whatever I ask, and I won't bother you any more now."

He stood looking up at her, waiting for her promise, with such adoration shining in his eyes that Jane was startled and more than a little troubled. Then suddenly it seemed to her that she had found the key, and she hastened to explain it to herself and to him.

"Oh, you dear boy!" she said. "What an artist you are! And how difficult it is for us commonplace, matter-of-fact people to understand the artistic temperament. Here you go, almost turning my steady old head by your rapture over what seemed to you perfection of sound which has reached you through the ear; just as, again and again, you worship at the shrine of perfection of form, which reaches you through the eye. I begin to understand how it is you turn the heads of women when you paint them. However, you are very delightful in your delight, and I want to go up to bed. So I promise to sing all you want and as much as you wish to-morrow. Now keep your promise and don't bother me any more to-night. Don't spend the whole night in the park, and try not to frighten the deer. No, I do not need any assistance with my candle, and I am quite used to going upstairs by myself, thank you. Can't you hear what personal and appropriate remarks Tommy is making down there? Now do run away, Master Garthie, and count your pearls. And if you suddenly come upon a cross—remember, the cross can, in all probability, be persuaded to return to Chicago!"

Jane was still smiling as she entered her room and placed her candlestick on the dressing-table.

Overdene was lighted solely by lamps and candles. The duchess refused to modernise it by the installation of electric light. But candles abounded, and Jane, who liked a brilliant illumination, proceeded to light both candles in the branches on either side of the dressing-table mirror, and in

the sconces on the wall beside the mantelpiece, and in the tall silver candlesticks upon the writing-table. Then she seated herself in a comfortable arm-chair, reached for her writing-case, took out her diary and a fountain pen, and prepared to finish the day's entry. She wrote, "SANG 'THE ROSARY' AT AUNT 'GINA'S CONCERT IN PLACE OF VELMA, FAILED (LARYNGITIS)," and came to a full stop.

Somehow the scene with Garth was difficult to record, and the sensations which still remained therefrom, absolutely unwritable. Jane sat and pondered the situation, content to allow the page to remain blank.

Before she rose, locked her book, and prepared for rest, she had, to her own satisfaction, clearly explained the whole thing. Garth's artistic temperament was the basis of the argument; and, alas, the artistic temperament is not a very firm foundation, either for a theory, or for the fabric of a destiny. However, FAUTE DE MIEUX, Jane had to accept it as main factor in her mental adjustment, thus: This vibrant emotion in Garth, so strangely disturbing to her own solid calm, was in no sense personal to herself, excepting in so far as her voice and musical gifts were concerned. Just as the sight of paintable beauty crazed him with delight, making him wild with alternate hope and despair until he obtained his wish and had his canvas and his sitter arranged to his liking; so now, his passion for the beautiful had been awakened, this time through the medium, not of sight, but of sound. When she had given him his fill of song, and allowed him to play some of her accompaniments, he would be content, and that disquieting look of adoration would pass from those beautiful brown eyes. Meanwhile it was pleasant to look forward to to-morrow, though it behooved her to remember that all this admiration had in it nothing personal to herself. He would have gone into even greater raptures over Madame Blanche, for instance, who had the same timbre of voice and method of singing, combined with a beauty of person which delighted the eye the while her voice enchanted the ear. Certainly Garth must see and hear her, as music appeared to mean so much to him. Jane began planning this, and then her mind turned to Pauline Lister, the lovely American girl, whose name had been coupled with Garth Dalmain's all the season. Jane felt certain she was just the wife he needed. Her loveliness would content him, her shrewd common-sense and straightforward, practical ways would counterbalance his somewhat erratic temperament, and her adaptability would enable her to suit herself to his surroundings, both in his northern home and amongst his large circle of friends down south. Once married, he would give up raving about Flower and Myra, and kissing people's hands in that—"absurd way," Jane was going to say, but she was invariably truthful, even in her thoughts, and substituted "extraordinary" as the more correct adjective—in that extraordinary way.

She sat forward in her chair with her elbows on her knees, and held her large hands before her, palms upward, realising again the sensations of that moment. Then she pulled herself up sharply. "Jane Champion, don't be a fool! You would wrong that dear, beauty-loving boy, more than you would wrong yourself, if you took him for one moment seriously. His homage to-night was no more personal to you than his appreciation of the excellent dinner was personal to Aunt Georgina's chef. In his enjoyment of the production, the producer was included; but that was all. Be gratified at the success of your art, and do not spoil that success by any absurd sentimentality. Now wash your very ungainly hands and go to bed." Thus Jane to herself.

And under the oaks, with soft turf beneath his feet, stood Garth Dalmain, the shy deer sleeping around unconscious of his presence; the planets above, hanging like lamps in the deep purple of the sky. And he, also, soliloquised.

"I have found her," he said, in low tones of rapture, "the ideal woman, the crown of womanhood, the perfect mate for the spirit, soul, and body of the man who can win her.—Jane! Jane! Ah, how blind I have been! To have known her for years, and yet not realised her to be this. But she lifted the veil, and I passed in. Ah grand, noble heart! She will never be able to draw the veil again between her soul and mine. And she has no rosary. I thank God for that. No other man possesses, or has ever possessed, that which I desire more than I ever desired anything upon this earth, Jane's love, Jane's

tenderness. Ah, what will it mean? 'I count each pearl.' She WILL count them some day—her pearls and mine. God spare us the cross. Must there be a cross to every true rosary? Then God give me the heavy end, and may the mutual bearing of it bind us together. Ah, those dear hands! Ah, those true steadfast eyes! … Jane!—Jane! Surely it has always been Jane, though I did not know it, blind fool that I have been! But one thing I know: whereas I was blind, now I see. And it will always be Jane from this night onward through time and-please God—into eternity."

The night breeze stirred his thick dark hair, and his eyes, as he raised them, shone in the starlight.

And Jane, almost asleep, was roused by the tapping of her blind against the casement, and murmured "Anything you wish, Garth, just tell me, and I will do it." Then awakening suddenly to the consciousness of what she had said, she sat up in the darkness and scolded herself furiously. "Oh, you middle-aged donkey! You call yourself staid and sensible, and a little flattery from a boy of whom you are fond turns your head completely. Come to your senses at once; or leave Overdene by the first train in the morning."

CHAPTER VIII
ADDED PEARLS

The days which followed were golden days to Jane. There was nothing to spoil the enjoyment of a very new and strangely sweet experience.

Garth's manner the next morning held none of the excitement or outward demonstration which had perplexed and troubled her the evening before. He was very quiet, and seemed to Jane older than she had ever known him. He had very few lapses into his seven-year-old mood, even with the duchess; and when someone chaffingly asked him whether he was practising the correct deportment of a soon-to-be-married man,

"Yes," said Garth quietly, "I am."

"Will she be at Shenstone?" inquired Ronald; for several of the duchess's party were due at Lady Ingleby's for the following week-end.

"Yes," said Garth, "she will."

"Oh, lor'!" cried Billy, dramatically. "Prithee, Benedict, are we to take this seriously?"

But Jane who, wrapped in the morning paper, sat near where Garth was standing, came out from behind it to look up at him and say, so that only he heard it "Oh, Dal, I am so glad! Did you make up your mind last night?"

"Yes," said Garth, turning so that he spoke to her alone, "last night."

"Did our talk in the afternoon have something to do with it?"

"No, nothing whatever."

"Was it THE ROSARY?"

He hesitated; then said, without looking at her: "The revelation of THE ROSARY? Yes."

To Jane his mood of excitement was now fully explained, and she could give herself up freely to the enjoyment of this new phase in their friendship, for the hours of music together were a very real delight. Garth was more of a musician than she had known, and she enjoyed his clean, masculine touch on the piano, unblurred by slur or pedal; more delicate than her own, where delicacy was required. What her voice was to him during those wonderful hours he did not express in words, for after that first evening he put a firm restraint upon his speech. Under the oaks he had made up his mind to wait a week before speaking, and he waited.

But the new and strangely sweet experience to Jane was that of being absolutely first to some one. In ways known only to himself and to her Garth made her feel this. There was nothing for any one else to notice, and yet she knew perfectly well that she never came into the room without his being instantly conscious that she was there; that she never left a room, without being at once missed by him. His attentions were so unobtrusive and tactful that no one else realised them. They called forth no chaff from friends and no "Hoity-toity! What now?" from the duchess. And yet his devotion seemed always surrounding her. For the first time in her life Jane was made to feel herself FIRST in the whole thought of another. It made him seem strangely her own. She took a pleasure and pride in all he said, and did, and was; and in the hours they spent together in the music-room she learned to know him and to understand that enthusiastic beauty-loving, irresponsible nature, as she had never understood it before.

The days were golden, and the parting at night was sweet, because it gave an added zest to the pleasure of meeting in the morning. And yet during these golden days the thought of love, in the ordinary sense of the word, never entered Jane's mind. Her ignorance in this matter arose, not so much from inexperience, as from too large an experience of the travesty of the real thing; an experience which hindered her from recognising love itself, now that love in its most ideal form was drawing near.

Jane had not come through a dozen seasons without receiving nearly a dozen proposals of marriage. An heiress, independent of parents and guardians, of good blood and lineage, a few proposals of a certain type were inevitable. Middle-aged men—becoming bald and grey; tired of racketing about town; with beautiful old country places and an unfortunate lack of the wherewithal to keep them up—proposed to the Honourable Jane Champion in a business-like way, and the Honourable Jane looked them up and down, and through and through, until they felt very cheap, and then quietly refused them, in an equally business-like way.

Two or three nice boys, whom she had pulled out of scrapes and set on their feet again after hopeless croppers, had thought, in a wave of maudlin gratitude, how good it would be for a fellow always to have her at hand to keep him straight and tell him what he ought to do, don't you know? and —er—well, yes—pay his debts, and be a sort of mother-who-doesn't scold kind of person to him; and had caught hold of her kind hand, and implored her to marry them. Jane had slapped them if they ventured to touch her, and recommended them not to be silly.

One solemn proposal she had had quite lately from the bachelor rector of a parish adjoining Overdene. He had often inflicted wearisome conversations upon her; and when he called, intending to put the momentous question, Jane, who was sitting at her writing-table in the Overdene drawing-room, did not see any occasion to move from it. If the rector became too prosy, she could surreptitiously finish a few notes. He sank into a deep arm-chair close to the writing-table, crossed his somewhat bandy legs one over the other, made the tips of his fingers meet with unctuous accuracy, and intoned the opening sentences of his proposition. Jane, sharpening pencils and sorting nibs, apparently only caught the drift of what he was saying, for when he had chanted the phrase, "Not alone from selfish motives, my dear Miss Champion; but for the good of my parish; for the welfare of my flock, for the advancement of the work of the church in our midst," Jane opened a despatch-box and drew out her cheque-book.

"I shall be delighted to subscribe, Mr. Bilberry," she said. "Is it for a font, a pulpit, new hymn-books, or what?"

"My dear lady," said the rector tremulously, "you misunderstand me. My desire is to lead you to the altar."

"Dear Mr. Bilberry," said Jane Champion, "that would be quite unnecessary. From any part of your church the fact that you need a new altar-cloth is absolutely patent to all comers. I will, with the greatest pleasure, give you a cheque for ten pounds towards it. I have attended your church rather often lately because I enjoy a long, quiet walk by myself through the woods. And now I am sure you would like to see my aunt before you go. She is in the aviary, feeding her foreign birds. If you go out by that window and pass along the terrace to your left, you will find the aviary and the duchess. I would suggest the advisability of not mentioning this conversation to my aunt. She does not approve of elaborate altar-cloths, and would scold us both, and insist on the money being spent in providing boots for the school children. No, please do not thank me. I am really glad of an opportunity of helping on your excellent work in this neighbourhood."

Jane wondered once or twice whether the cheque would be cashed. She would have liked to receive it back by post, torn in half; with a few wrathful lines of manly indignation. But when it returned to her in due course from her bankers, it was indorsed P. BILBERRY, in a neat scholarly hand, without even a dash of indignation beneath it; and she threw it into the waste-paper basket, with rather a bitter smile.

These were Jane's experiences of offers of marriage. She had never been loved for her own sake; she had never felt herself really first in the heart and life of another. And now, when the adoring love of a man's whole being was tenderly, cautiously beginning to surround and envelop her, she did not recognise the reason of her happiness or of his devotion. She considered him the avowed lover of another woman, with whose youth and loveliness she would not have dreamed of competing; and

she regarded this closeness of intimacy between herself and Garth as a development of a friendship more beautiful than she had hitherto considered possible.

Thus matters stood when Tuesday arrived and the Overdene party broke up. Jane went to town to spend a couple of days with the Brands. Garth went straight to Shenstone, where he had been asked expressly to meet Miss Lister and her aunt, Mrs. Parker Bangs. Jane was due at Shenstone on Friday for the week-end.

CHAPTER IX
LADY INGLEBY'S HOUSE PARTY

As Jane took her seat and the train moved out of the London terminus she leaned back in her corner with a sigh of satisfaction. Somehow these days in town had seemed insufferably long. Jane reviewed them thoughtfully, and sought the reason. They had been filled with interests and engagements; and the very fact of being in town, as a rule, contented her. Why had she felt so restless and dissatisfied and lonely?

From force of habit she had just stopped at the railway book-stall for her usual pile of literature. Her friends always said Jane could not go even the shortest journey without at least half a dozen papers. But now they lay unheeded on the seat in front of her. Jane was considering her Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and wondering why they had merely been weary stepping-stones to Friday. And here was Friday at last, and once in the train en route for Shenstone, she began to feel happy and exhilarated. What had been the matter with these three days? Flower had been charming; Deryck, his own friendly, interesting self; little Dicky, delightful; and Baby Blossom, as sweet as only Baby Blossom could be. What was amiss?

"I know," said Jane. "Of course! Why did I not realise it before? I had too much music during those last days at Overdene; and SUCH music! I have been suffering from a surfeit of music, and the miss of it has given me this blank feeling of loneliness. No doubt we shall have plenty at Myra's, and Dal will be there to clamour for it if Myra fails to suggest it."

With a happy little smile of pleasurable anticipation, Jane took up the SPECTATOR, and was soon absorbed in an article on the South African problem.

Myra met her at the station, driving ponies tandem. A light cart was also there for the maid and baggage; and, without losing a moment, Jane and her hostess were off along the country lane at a brisk trot.

The fields and woods were an exquisite restful green in the afternoon sunshine. Wild roses clustered in the hedges. The last loads of hay were being carted in. There was an ecstasy in the songs of the birds and a transporting sense of sweetness about all the sights and scents of the country, such as Jane had never experienced so vividly before. She drew a deep breath and exclaimed, almost involuntarily: "Ah! it is good to be here!"

"You dear!" said Lady Ingleby, twirling her whip and nodding in gracious response to respectful salutes from the hay-field. "It is a comfort to have you! I always feel you are like the bass of a tune —something so solid and satisfactory and beneath one in case of a crisis. I hate crises. They are so tiring. As I say: Why can't things always go on as they are? They are as they were, and they were as they will be, if only people wouldn't bother. However, I am certain nothing could go far wrong when YOU are anywhere near."

Myra flicked the leader, who was inclined to "sugar," and they flew along between the high hedges, brushing lightly against overhanging masses of honeysuckle and wild clematis. Jane snatched a spray of the clematis, in passing. "'Traveller's joy,'" she said, with that same quiet smile of glad anticipation, and put the white blossom in her buttonhole.

"Well," continued Lady Ingleby, "my house party is going on quite satisfactorily. Oh, and, Jane, there seems no doubt about Dal. How pleased I shall be if it comes off under my wing! The American girl is simply exquisite, and so vivacious and charming. And Dal has quite given up being silly—not that *I* ever thought him silly, but I know YOU did—and is very quiet and pensive; really were it any one but he, one would almost say 'dull.' And they roam about together in the most approved fashion. I try to get the aunt to make all her remarks to me. I am so afraid of her putting Dal off. He is so fastidious. I have promised Billy anything, up to the half of my kingdom, if he will sit at the feet

of Mrs. Parker Bangs and listen to her wisdom, answer her questions, and keep her away from Dal. Billy is being so abjectly devoted in his attentions to Mrs. Parker Bangs that I begin to have fears lest he intends asking me to kiss him; in which case I shall hand him over to you to chastise. You manage these boys so splendidly. I fully believe Dal will propose to Pauline Lister tonight. I can't imagine why he didn't last night. There was a most perfect moon, and they went on the lake. What more COULD Dal want?—a lake, and a moon, and that lovely girl! Billy took Mrs. Parker Bangs in a double canoe and nearly upset her through laughing so much at the things she said about having to sit flat on the bottom. But he paddled her off to the opposite side of the lake from Dal and her niece, which was all we wanted. Mrs. Parker Bangs asked me afterwards whether Billy is a widower. Now what do you suppose she meant by that?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Jane. "But I am delighted to hear about Dal and Miss Lister. She is just the girl for him, and she will soon adapt herself to his ways and needs. Besides, Dal MUST have flawless loveliness, and really he gets it there."

"He does indeed," said Myra. "You should have seen her last night, in white satin, with wild roses in her hair. I cannot imagine why Dal did not rave. But perhaps it is a good sign that he should take things more quietly. I suppose he is making up his mind."

"No," said Jane. "I believe he did that at Overdene. But it means a lot to him. He takes marriage very seriously. Whom have you at Shenstone?"

Lady Ingleby told off a list of names. Jane knew them all.

"Delightful!" she said. "Oh! how glad I am to be here! London has been so hot and so dull. I never thought it hot or dull before. I feel a renegade. Ah! there is the lovely little church! I want to hear the new organ. I was glad your nice parson remembered me and let me have a share in it. Has it two manuals or three?"

"Half a dozen I think," said Lady Ingleby, "and you work them up and down with your feet. But I judged it wiser to leave them alone when I played for the children's service one Sunday. You never know quite what will happen if you touch those mechanical affairs."

"Don't you mean the composition pedals?" suggested Jane.

"I dare say I do," said Myra placidly. "Those things underneath, like foot-rests, which startle you horribly if you accidentally kick them."

Jane smiled at the thought of how Garth would throw back his head and shout, if she told him of this conversation. Lady Ingleby's musical remarks always amused her friends.

They passed the village church on the green, ivy-clad, picturesque, and, half a minute later, swerved in at the park gates. Myra saw Jane glance at the gate-post they had just shaved, and laughed. "A miss is as good as a mile," she said, as they dashed up the long drive between the elms, "as I told dear mamma, when she expostulated wrathfully with me for what she called my 'furious driving' the other day. By the way, Jane, dear mamma has been quite CORDIAL lately. By the time I am seventy and she is ninety-eight I think she will begin to be almost fond of me. Here we are. Do notice Lawson. He is new, and such a nice man. He sings so well, and plays the concertina a little, and teaches in the Sunday-school, and speaks really quite excellently at temperance meetings. He is extremely fond of mowing the lawns, and my maid tells me he is studying French with her. The only thing he seems really incapable of being, is an efficient butler; which is so unfortunate, as I like him far too well ever to part with him. Michael says I have a perfectly fatal habit of LIKING PEOPLE, and of encouraging them to do the things they do well and enjoy doing, instead of the things they were engaged to do. I suppose I have; but I do like my household to be happy."

They alighted, and Myra trailed into the hall with a lazy grace which gave no indication of the masterly way she had handled her ponies, but rather suggested stepping from a comfortable seat in a barouche. Jane looked with interest at the man-servant who came forward and deftly assisted them. He had not quite the air of a butler but neither could she imagine him playing a concertina or haranguing a temperance meeting and he acquitted himself quite creditably.

"Oh, that was not Lawson," explained Myra, as she led the way upstairs. "I had forgotten. He had to go to the vicarage this afternoon to see the vicar about a 'service of song' they are getting up. That was Tom, but we call him 'Jephson' in the house. He was one of Michael's stud grooms, but he is engaged to one of the housemaids, and I found he so very much preferred being in the house, so I have arranged for him to understudy Lawson, and he is growing side whiskers. I shall have to break it to Michael on his return from Norway. This way, Jane. We have put you in the Magnolia room. I knew you would enjoy the view of the lake. Oh, I forgot to tell you, a tennis tournament is in progress. I must hasten to the courts. Tea will be going on there, under the chestnuts. Dal and Ronnie are to play the final for the men's singles. It ought to be a fine match. It was to come on at about half-past four. Don't wait to do any changings. Your maid and your luggage can't be here just yet."

"Thanks," said Jane; "I always travel in country clothes, and have done so to-day, as you see. I will just get rid of the railway dust, and follow you."

Ten minutes later, guided by sounds of cheering and laughter, Jane made her way through the shrubbery to the tennis lawns. The whole of Lady Ingleby's house party was assembled there, forming a picturesque group under the white and scarlet chestnut-trees. Beyond, on the beautifully kept turf of the court, an exciting set was in progress. As she approached, Jane could distinguish Garth's slim, agile figure, in white flannels and the violet shirt; and young Ronnie, huge and powerful, trusting to the terrific force of his cuts and drives to counterbalance Garth's keener eye and swifter turn of wrist.

It was a fine game. Garth had won the first set by six to four, and now the score stood at five to four in Ronnie's favour; but this game was Garth's service, and he was almost certain to win it. The score would then be "games all."

Jane walked along the line of garden chairs to where she saw a vacant one near Myra. She was greeted with delight, but hurriedly, by the eager watchers of the game.

Suddenly a howl went up. Garth had made two faults.

Jane found her chair, and turned her attention to the game. Almost instantly shrieks of astonishment and surprise again arose. Garth had served INTO the net and OVER the line. Game and set were Ronnie's.

"One all," remarked Billy. "Well! I never saw Dal do THAT before. However; it gives us the bliss of watching another set. They are splendidly matched. Dal is lightning, and Ronnie thunder."

The players crossed over, Garth rather white beneath his tan. He was beyond words vexed with himself for failing in his service, at that critical juncture. Not that he minded losing the set; but it seemed to him it must be patent to the whole crowd, that it was the sight, out of the tail of his eye, of a tall grey figure moving quietly along the line of chairs, which for a moment or two set earth and sky whirling, and made a confused blur of net and lines. As a matter of fact, only one of the onlookers connected Garth's loss of the game with Jane's arrival, and she was the lovely girl, seated exactly opposite the net, with whom he exchanged a smile and a word as he crossed to the other side of the court.

The last set proved the most exciting of the three. Nine hard-fought games, five to Garth, four to Ronnie. And now Ronnie was serving, and fighting hard to make it games-all. Over and over enthusiastic partisans of both shouted "Deuce!" and then when Garth had won the "vantage," a slashing over-hand service from Ronnie beat him, and it was "deuce" again.

"Don't it make one giddy?" said Mrs. Parker Bangs to Billy, who reclined on the sward at her feet. "I should say it has gone on long enough. And they must both be wanting their tea. It would have been kind in Mr. Dalmain to have let that ball pass, anyway."

"Yes, wouldn't it?" said Billy earnestly. "But you see, Dal is not naturally kind. Now, if I had been playing against Ronnie, I should have let those over-hand balls of his pass long ago."

"I am sure you would," said Mrs. Parker Bangs, approvingly; while Jane leaned over, at Myra's request, and pinched Billy.

Slash went Ronnie's racket. "Deuce! deuce!" shouted half a dozen voices.

"They shouldn't say that," remarked Mrs. Parker Bangs, "even if they are mad about it."

Billy hugged his knees, delightedly; looking up at her with an expression of seraphic innocence.

"No. Isn't it sad?" he murmured. "I never say naughty words when I play. I always say 'Game love.' It sounds so much nicer, I think."

Jane pinched again, but Billy's rapt gaze at Mrs. Parker Bangs continued.

"Billy," said Myra sternly, "go into the hall and fetch my scarlet sunshade. Yes, I dare say you WILL miss the finish," she added in a stern whisper, as he leaned over her chair, remonstrating; "but you richly deserve it."

"I have made up my mind what to ask, dear queen," whispered Billy as he returned, breathless, three minutes later and laid the parasol in Lady Ingleby's lap. "You promised me anything, up to the half of your kingdom. I will have the head of Mrs. Parker Bangs in a charger."

"Oh, shut up, Billy!" exclaimed Jane, "and get out of the light! We missed that last stroke. What is the score?"

Once again it was Garth's vantage, and once again Ronnie's arm swung high for an untakable smasher.

"Play up, Dal!" cried a voice, amid the general hubbub.

Garth knew that dear voice. He did not look in its direction, but he smiled. The next moment his arm shot out like a flash of lightning. The ball touched ground on Ronnie's side of the net and shot the length of the court without rising. Ronnie's wild scoop at it was hopeless. Game and set were Garth's.

They walked off the ground together, their rackets under their arms, the flush of a well-contested fight on their handsome faces. It had been so near a thing that both could sense the thrill of victory.

Pauline Lister had been sitting with Garth's coat on her lap, and his watch and chain were in her keeping. He paused a moment to take them up and receive her congratulations; then, slipping on his coat, and pocketing his watch, came straight to Jane.

"How do you do, Miss Champion?"

His eyes sought hers eagerly; and the welcoming gladness he saw in them filled him with certainty and content. He had missed her so unutterably during these days. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday had just been weary stepping-stones to Friday. It seemed incredible that one person's absence could make so vast a difference. And yet how perfect that it should be so; and that they should both realise it, now the day had come when he intended to tell her how desperately he wanted her always. Yes, that they should BOTH realise it—for he felt certain Jane had also experienced the blank. A thing so complete and overwhelming as the miss of her had been to him could not be one-sided. And how well worth the experience of these lonely days if they had thereby learned something of what TOGETHER meant, now the words were to be spoken which should insure forever no more such partings.

All this sped through Garth's mind as he greeted Jane with that most commonplace of English greetings, the everlasting question which never receives an answer. But from Garth, at that moment, it did not sound commonplace to Jane, and she answered it quite frankly and fully. She wanted above all things to tell him exactly how she did; to hear all about himself, and compare notes on the happenings of these three interminable days; and to take up their close comradeship again, exactly where it had left off. Her hand went home to his with that firm completeness of clasp, which always made a hand shake with Jane such a satisfactory and really friendly thing.

"Very fit, thank you, Dal," she answered. "At least I am every moment improving in health and spirits, now I have arrived here at last."

Garth stood his racket against the arm of her chair and deposited himself full length on the grass beside her, leaning on his elbow.

"Was anything wrong with London?" he asked, rather low, not looking up at her, but at the smart brown shoe, planted firmly on the grass so near his hand. "Nothing was wrong with London,"

replied Jane frankly; "it was hot and dusty of course, but delightful as usual. Something was wrong with ME; and you will be ashamed of me, Dal, if I confess what it was."

Garth did not look up, but assiduously picked little blades of grass and laid them in a pattern on Jane's shoe. This conversation would have been exactly to the point had they been alone. But was Jane really going to announce to the assembled company, in that dear, resonant, carrying voice of hers, the sweet secret of their miss of one another?

"Liver?" inquired Mrs. Parker Bangs suddenly.

"Muffins!" exclaimed Billy instantly, and, rushing for them, almost shot them into her lap in the haste with which he handed them, stumbling headlong over Garth's legs at the same moment.

Jane stared at Mrs. Parker Bangs and her muffins; then looked down at the top of Garth's dark head, bent low over the grass.

"I was dull," she said, "intolerably dull. And Dal always says 'only a dullard is dull.' But I diagnosed my dulness in the train just now and found it was largely his fault. Do you hear, Dal?"

Garth lifted his head and looked at her, realising in that moment that it was, after all, possible for a complete and overwhelming experience to be one-sided. Jane's calm grey eyes were full of gay friendliness.

"It was your fault, my dear boy," said Jane.

"How so?" queried Garth; and though there was a deep flush on his sunburned face, his voice was quietly interrogative.

"Because, during those last days at Overdene, you led me on into a time of musical dissipation such as I had never known before, and I missed it to a degree which was positively alarming. I began to fear for the balance of my well-ordered mind."

"Well," said Myra, coming out from behind her red parasol, "you and Dal can have orgies of music here if you want them. You will find a piano in the drawing-room and another in the hall, and a Bechstein grand in the billiard-room. That is where I hold the practices for the men and maids. I could not make up my mind which makers I really preferred, Erard, Broadwood, Collard, or Bechstein; so by degrees I collected one of each. And after all I think I play best upon the little cottage piano we had in the school-room at home. It stands in my boudoir now. I seem more accustomed to its notes, or it lends itself better to my way of playing."

"Thank you, Myra," said Jane. "I fancy Dal and I will like the Bechstein."

"And if you want something really exciting in the way of music," continued Lady Ingleby, "you might attend some of the rehearsals for this 'service of song' they are getting up in aid of the organ deficit fund. I believe they are attempting great things."

"I would sooner pay off the whole deficit, than go within a mile of a 'service of song,'" said Jane emphatically.

"Oh, no," put in Garth quickly, noting Myra's look of disappointment. "It is so good for people to work off their own debts and earn the things they need in their churches. And 'services of song' are delightful if well done, as I am sure this will be if Lady Ingleby's people are in it. Lawson outlined it to me this morning, and hummed all the principal airs. It is highly dramatic. Robinson Crusoe—no, of course not! What's the beggar's name? 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'? Yes, I knew it was something black. Lawson is Uncle Tom, and the vicar's small daughter is to be little Eva. Miss Champion, you will walk down with me to the very next rehearsal."

"Shall I?" said Jane, unconscious of how tender was the smile she gave him; conscious only that in her own heart was the remembrance of the evening at Overdene when she felt so inclined to say to him: "Tell me just what you want me to do, and I will do it."

"Pauline will just love to go with you," said Mrs. Parker Bangs. "She dotes on rural music."

"Rubbish, aunt!" said Miss Lister, who had slipped into an empty chair near Myra. "I agree with Miss Champion about 'services of song,' and I don't care for any music but the best."

Jane turned to her quickly, with a cordial smile and her most friendly manner. "Ah, but you must come," she said. "We will be victimised together. And perhaps Dal and Lawson will succeed in converting us to the cult of the 'service of song.' And anyway it will be amusing to have Dal explain it to us. He will need the courage of his convictions."

"Talking of something 'really exciting in the way of music,'" said Pauline Lister, "we had it on board when we came over. There was a nice friendly crowd on board the Arabic, and they arranged a concert for half-past eight on the Thursday evening. We were about two hundred miles off the coast of Ireland, and when we came up from dinner we had run into a dense fog. At eight o'clock they started blowing the fog-horn every half-minute, and while the fog-horn was sounding you couldn't hear yourself speak. However, all the programmes were printed, and it was our last night on board, so they concluded to have the concert all the same. Down we all trooped into the saloon, and each item of that programme was punctuated by the stentorian BOO of the fog-horn every thirty seconds. You never heard anything so cute as the way it came in, right on time. A man with a deep bass voice sang ROCKED IN THE CRADLE OF THE DEEP, and each time he reached the refrain, 'And calm and peaceful is my sle-eep,' BOO went the fog-horn, casting a certain amount of doubt on our expectations of peaceful sleep that night, anyway. Then a man with a sweet tenor sang OFT IN THE STILLY NIGHT, and the fog-horn showed us just how oft, namely, every thirty seconds. But the queerest effect of all was when a girl had to play a piano-forte solo. It was something of Chopin's, full of runs and trills and little silvery notes. She started all right; but when she was half-way down the first page, BOO went the fog-horn, a longer blast than usual. We saw her fingers flying, and the turning of the page, but not a note could we hear; and when the old horn stopped and we could hear the piano again, she had reached a place half-way down the second page, and we hadn't heard what led to it. My! it was funny. That went on all through. She was a plucky girl to stick to it. We gave her a good round of applause when she had finished, and the fog-horn joined in and drowned us. It was the queerest concert experience I ever had. But we all enjoyed it. Only we didn't enjoy that noise keeping right on until five o'clock next morning."

Jane had turned in her chair, and listened with appreciative interest while the lovely American girl talked, watching, with real delight, her exquisite face and graceful gestures, and thinking how Dal must enjoy looking at her when she talked with so much charm and animation. She glanced down, trying to see the admiration in his eyes; but his head was bent, and he was apparently absorbed in the occupation of tracing the broguing of her shoes with the long stalk of a chestnut leaf. For a moment she watched the slim brown hand, as carefully intent on this useless task, as if working on a canvas; then she suddenly withdrew her foot, feeling almost vexed with him for his inattention and apparent indifference.

Garth sat up instantly. "It must have been awfully funny," he said. "And how well you told it. One could hear the fog-horn, and see the dismayed faces of the performers. Like an earthquake, a fog-horn is the sort of thing you don't ever get used to. It sounds worse every time. Let's each tell the funniest thing we remember at a concert. I once heard a youth recite Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade with much dramatic action. But he was extremely nervous, and got rather mixed. In describing the attitude of mind of the noble six hundred, he told us impressively that it was"

"'Theirs not to make reply;
Theirs not to do or die;
Theirs BUT TO REASON WHY.'"

"The tone and action were all right, and I doubt whether many of the audience noticed anything wrong with the words."

"That reminds me," said Ronald Ingram, "of quite the funniest thing I ever heard. It was at a Thanksgiving service when some of our troops returned from South Africa. The proceedings

concluded by the singing of the National Anthem right through. You recollect how recently we had had to make the change of pronoun, and how difficult it was to remember not to shout:"

"'Send HER victorious'? Well, there was a fellow just behind me, with a tremendous voice, singing lustily, and taking special pains to get the pronouns correct throughout. And when he reached the fourth line of the second verse he sang with loyal fervour."

"'Confound HIS politics,
Frustrate HIS knavish tricks!'"

"That would amuse the King," said Lady Ingleby. "Are you sure it is a fact, Ronnie?"

"Positive! I could tell you the church, and the day, and call a whole pewful of witnesses who were convulsed by it."

"Well, I shall tell his Majesty at the next opportunity, and say you heard it. But how about the tennis? What comes next? Final for couples? Oh, yes! Dal, you and Miss Lister play Colonel Loraine and Miss Vermount; and I think you ought to win fairly easily. You two are so well matched. Jane, this will be worth watching."

"I am sure it will," said Jane warmly, looking at the two, who had risen and stood together in the evening sunlight, examining their rackets and discussing possible tactics, while awaiting their opponents. They made such a radiantly beautiful couple; it was as if nature had put her very best and loveliest into every detail of each. The only fault which could possibly have been found with the idea of them wedded, was that her dark, slim beauty was so very much just a feminine edition of his, that they might easily have been taken for brother and sister; but this was not a fault which occurred to Jane. Her whole-hearted admiration of Pauline increased every time she looked at her; and now she had really seen them together, she felt sure she had given wise advice to Garth, and rejoiced to know he was taking it.

Later on, as they strolled back to the house together,—she and Garth alone,—Jane said, simply: "Dal, you will not mind if I ask? Is it settled yet?"

"I mind nothing you ask," Garth replied; "only be more explicit. Is what settled?"

"Are you and Miss Lister engaged?"

"No," Garth answered. "What made you suppose we should be?"

"You said at Overdene on Tuesday—TUESDAY! oh! doesn't it seem weeks ago?—you said we were to take you seriously."

"It seems years ago," said Garth; "and I sincerely hope you will take me—seriously. All the same I have not proposed to Miss Lister; and I am anxious for an undisturbed talk with you on the subject. Miss Champion, after dinner to-night, when all the games and amusements are in full swing, and we can escape unobserved, will you come out onto the terrace with me, where I shall be able to speak to you without fear of interruption? The moonlight on the lake is worth seeing from the terrace. I spent an hour out there last night—ah, no; you are wrong for once—I spent it alone, when the boating was over, and thought of—how—to-night—we might be talking there together."

"Certainly I will come," said Jane; "and you must feel free to tell me anything you wish, and promise to let me advise or help in any way I can."

"I will tell you everything," said Garth very low, "and you shall advise and help as ONLY you can."

Jane sat on her window-sill, enjoying the sunset and the exquisite view, and glad of a quiet half-hour before she need think of summoning her maid. Immediately below her ran the terrace, wide and gravelled, bounded by a broad stone parapet, behind which was a drop of eight or ten feet to the old-fashioned garden, with quaint box-bordered flower-beds, winding walks, and stone fountains. Beyond, a stretch of smooth lawn sloping down to the lake, which now lay, a silver mirror, in the soft evening light. The stillness was so perfect; the sense of peace, so all-pervading. Jane held a book on

her knee, but she was not reading. She was looking away to the distant woods beyond the lake; then to the pearly sky above, flecked with rosy clouds and streaked with gleams of gold; and a sense of content, and gladness, and well-being, filled her.

Presently she heard a light step on the gravel below and leaned forward to see to whom it belonged. Garth had come out of the smoking-room and walked briskly to and fro, once or twice. Then he threw himself into a wicker seat just beneath her window, and sat there, smoking meditatively. The fragrance of his cigarette reached Jane, up among the magnolia blossoms. "'Zenith,' Marcovitch," she said to herself, and smiled. "Packed in jolly green boxes, twelve shillings a hundred! I must remember in case I want to give him a Christmas present. By then it will be difficult to find anything which has not already been showered upon him."

Garth flung away the end of his cigarette, and commenced humming below his breath; then gradually broke into words and sang softly, in his sweet barytone:

"'It is not mine to sing the stately grace,
The great soul beaming in my lady's face.'"

The tones, though quiet, were so vibrant with passionate feeling, that Jane felt herself an eavesdropper. She hastily picked a large magnolia leaf and, leaning out, let it fall upon his head. Garth started, and looked up. "Hullo!" he said. "YOU—up there?"

"Yes," said Jane, laughing down at him, and speaking low lest other casements should be open, "I—up here. You are serenading the wrong window, dear 'devout lover.'"

"What a lot you know about it," remarked Garth, rather moodily.

"Don't I?" whispered Jane. "But you must not mind, Master Garthie, because you know how truly I care. In old Margery's absence, you must let me be mentor."

Garth sprang up and stood erect, looking up at her, half-amused, half-defiant.

"Shall I climb the magnolia?" he said. "I have heaps to say to you which cannot be shouted to the whole front of the house."

"Certainly not," replied Jane. "I don't want any Romeos coming in at my window. 'Hoity-toity! What next?' as Aunt 'Gina would say. Run along and change your pinafore, Master Garthie. The 'heaps of things' must keep until to-night, or we shall both be late for dinner."

"All right," said Garth, "all right. But you will come out here this evening, Miss Champion? And you will give me as long as I want?"

"I will come as soon as we can possibly escape," replied Jane; "and you cannot be more anxious to tell me everything than I am to hear it. Oh! the scent of these magnolias! And just look at the great white trumpets! Would you like one for your buttonhole?"

He gave her a wistful, whimsical little smile; then turned and went indoors.

"Why do I feel so inclined to tease him?" mused Jane, as she moved, from the window. "Really it is I who have been silly this time; and he, staid and sensible. Myra is quite right. He is taking it very seriously. And how about her? Ah! I hope she cares enough, and in the right way.—Come in, Matthews! And you can put out the gown I wore on the night of the concert at Overdene, and we must make haste. We have just twenty minutes. What a lovely evening! Before you do anything else, come and see this sunset on the lake. Ah! it is good to be here!"

CHAPTER X
THE REVELATION

All the impatience in the world could not prevent dinner at Shenstone from being a long function, and two of the most popular people in the party could not easily escape afterwards unnoticed. So a distant clock in the village was striking ten, as Garth and Jane stepped out on to the terrace together. Garth caught up a rug in passing, and closed the door of the lower hall carefully behind him.

They were quite alone. It was the first time they had been really alone since these days apart, which had seemed so long to both.

They walked silently, side by side, to the wide stone parapet overlooking the old-fashioned garden. The silvery moonlight flooded the whole scene with radiance. They could see the stiff box-borders, the winding paths, the queerly shaped flower-beds, and, beyond, the lake, like a silver mirror, reflecting the calm loveliness of the full moon.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.