

The Rosary

BY

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THE ROSARY

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 own 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 'bogied' 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.

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