

## 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 Fête 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

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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 sundial 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?"