

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 some one 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 droppers, 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