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from Toni Fenton .
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By FLORENCE L. BARCLAY

The Rosary
The Mistress of Shenstone
The Following of the Star
Through the Postern Gate
The Upas Tree.
The Broken Halo
The Wall of Partition
The White Ladies of Worcester
Returned Empty
The Wheels of Time
My Heart's Right There
Hoc ✕ Vince

The Rosary

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By

Florence L. Barclay

*Author of "The Mistress of Shenstone," "The Following
of the Star," etc.*



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To ANGELA

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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 cowdaisies.

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 offhand 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