

JESSICA'S CHOICE.

CHAPTER I.

Americans are eminently gregarious, and show this quality in their choice of dwellings. If any one doubts this statement, let him recall all that he has seen of the places easy of access to New York; the sea side resorts where the houses stand in long continuous lines on the shore; where everybody knows just who is visiting everybody else, and what they will all have for dinner; where it is unsafe to dress of a morning without a great lowering of blinds and furtive glances in order to ascertain who is regarding one from the walk along the bluff, or the contiguous—the *very* contiguous—piazza of a neighbor's house.

Somehow, an Englishman appears to object to having strangers peering into his windows. He buys himself—if he chance not to belong to that favored class which finds everything ready-made for them—several acres at least, and surrounds them with a brick wall ten feet high, crowned with inhospitable broken bottles or still more uninviting iron spikes. Exclusiveness seems to him a part of aristocracy. The lower classes may inhabit tidy little suburban cottages and semi-detached villas, with names long enough to reach from attic to cellar if placed perpendicularly, but the well-bred Briton, the country gentleman, the man with a rent-roll and an undisputed right to a coat of arms, cannot and will not bear the vulgar gaze, and shuts himself out of sight as best he may.

The average American, by reason of his press of business cares, must needs live near a railway-station if he resides "out of town." The greatest recommendation contained in an advertisement of a country-house is the alluring assertion that it is "five minutes' walk from the station."

One often sees a twenty-thousand dollar "Queen Anne" mansion standing on a plot of ground not large enough to accommodate a moderate-sized kitchen-garden. The houses on both sides seem to be elbowing it. The inmates of one dwelling can sit on the piazza and hear what is being said by the persons on the balcony next door.

Next to the desire for easy access to trains, probably the servant question furnishes the real reason for this gregariousness.

That question alone would fill a volume if properly discussed and treated even from the individual stand-point of one who has suffered much in trying to solve the problem. Who has not heard complaints from their domestics about the "loneliness" of most localities? The distance from church is another fruitful source of discontent.

As every day it becomes more difficult for the luckless American house-keeper to obtain or retain reliable servants, she is glad enough, doubtless, to fly to one of these suburban communities, where the "help" can find companions to rob the place of its loneliness and induce them to stay.

All this is by way of introduction to the statement that in one of these semi-detached houses, in a row with many more, in the State of New Jersey, not a long way from the line of ferry-boats which connects the provincial barbarians with the metropolis, lived Mrs. Hilton, a widow, with two daughters. She had not always lived in New Jersey, as she sometimes remarked with a good deal of plaintiveness. It was not five years since she had resided in a fashionable street in New York, and gone into society, if not the best at least the next best, and who knows which either of those really is?

The cause of her removal from the pomp and circumstance of a brown-stone front to a yellow-and-red bay-windowed cottage in a neighboring State was not the all agitating question to which we have alluded, neither was it a wish to be near a railway-station. It was simply the fact that her husband, an apparently thriving stock broker, had suddenly been ruined, and had died of chagrin and alcohol shortly after.

Mrs. Hilton found herself bereft of all fortune save a few thousands which had been settled on her at the time of her marriage. Her daughters, girls of respectively twenty and twenty-two years of age, had been accustomed to appear and consider themselves rich, even if they had never been so, and the calamity fell heavily upon them. Jessica, the elder, was really beautiful, clever, and quick-witted,—too much so to be a favorite with either sex,—and wonderfully useless and impracticable. Lily, the younger, was what is called "nice looking," and had a good deal of adaptability and common sense for her years. Jessica had always ruled the house, beginning, when she was not a year old, to exercise that authority which is the prerogative of American childhood, and being weakly indulged by her obedient parents. She grew into an exceedingly handsome girl,—fair and fresh as a girl should be, with a wonderful red and white skin, and hair and brows of raven black.

Her proud father had given her the pet name of "Beauty," and so she continued to be called after she had attained her full growth and loveliness. The latter was at its height when our story opens.

The house which Mrs. Hilton had selected as her place of retirement and retrenchment was remarkable for nothing save its inconvenience and the largeness of rent in comparison with the money which had originally been expended on the structure. It was built in a sort of bastard Queen Anne style (how much that good sovereign has been responsible for in these latter years!) with jutting windows placed at impossible angles, and cheap catchpenny effects in latticed windows, inferior stained glass, and other adornments apparently peculiar to "Queen Anne" houses.

It certainly looked unprepossessing enough on a day in early spring, when our proverbial spring weather had left the trees still bare, and only the faintest hint of green in the withered grass. The lawn had patches of snow on it still. The road was a slough of red mud, and the creepers which mercifully draped the Queen Anne enormities in summer hung limp and dripping to the yellow wall.

Inside, things looked more attractive. There was a coal fire glowing in

the grate of the front parlor. The furniture was all good and substantial and tastefully arranged. The enforced economy of the household did not manifest itself in the appearance of this room at least. That universal curse of American homes, furnace-heat, was wanting, and in consequence the atmosphere was pleasant and not enervating. There were two occupants of the parlor, Mrs. Hilton and Jessica. The former sat near the fire, in a low chair, with a work-basket beside her. A half-darned stocking lay in her lap, but her hands were folded idly above it, and her thoughts were evidently very far from her late occupation.

Jessica stood half facing the window, through which a part of the sodden, desolate lawn was visible. She held an open letter in her hand. Her eyes were fixed on the dreary prospect without. Her gown was simple and shabby,—the "rainy day dress" of a girl whose best clothes were far from being either fresh or costly,—but she was beautiful.

Something had disturbed the quiet every-day current of their lives. That was apparent. There was a look of mingled regret and defiance on the face of the younger woman, and an expression of anxiety on that of the elder.

"You are quite sure you *could* not do it?" Mrs. Hilton said, with a plaintive insistence. She was a small unobtrusive lady in black, with a voice which easily attuned itself to a minor key; yet she was not destitute of a sort of modest perseverance, and there was that in her tone which would have convinced any auditor that this was not the first time that she had asked the question.

"You are *quite* sure, Jessica?"

"Quite sure," said the girl, almost sharply.

"It is giving up a great deal, dear. Do you realize that?"

"A great deal of unhappiness, mamma."

"That you only suppose. You can't be sure."

Jessica made a gesture indicative of impatience.

"I am just as sure as—as I can be," she said, ending rather weakly.

"Ah, yes, but no surer," said Mrs. Hilton, nodding her head wisely.

"I begged you," broke out Jessica, turning her back to the window, and facing her mother, "I begged you not to have any hopes of it ever coming about. I never meant to marry him. I kept him from asking me for a year. He can't say I haven't been honest with him."

Mrs. Hilton sighed softly.

"Have you any new objections to him, Beauty?"

"Only the old one."

"Perhaps you are over-sensitive, love. You certainly like Mr. Thorndyke as well as you do anybody."

Jessica colored a little.

"I don't think I do," she said, bluntly.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hilton, with a soft tone of surprise. She was too discreet to say more.

"I like him too well to marry him, though, mother," said Jessica, throwing herself into a chair. "He would bore me to death in a week, and he would repent of his bargain."

"I like romance in a young girl, but perhaps you don't realize how largely a happy married life is a question of butchers' bills and house rent. I don't want to urge you unduly, but, my dear, we are *very* poor. Inconvenient as this house is, it is beyond our means. I used to be considered a good housekeeper, but I can't keep house on nothing. The servants don't eat so! I suppose it's the country air. I don't grudge it to them, poor souls, but then all that tells in the monthly bills."

Mrs. Hilton's small face looked very gloomy under its neatly-parted hair. Jessica laughed a little.

"Poor mother!" she said. "I wish a fairy prince would come along and *make* me love him, and then we would shower diamonds and gold pieces on you! I am so useless. I feel myself only a dead weight to the family. Lily is worth twice as much as I." And the laugh ended in a sob.

"I am almost persuaded sometimes," she went on, and then paused, and put her hand to her eyes.

"Poor child!" cried Mrs. Hilton. "What should we do without you? Never say that you are useless."

Indeed, Mrs. Hilton and her younger daughter were contented to do their work and regard Jessica in the light of a relaxation,—their picture gallery, their theatre, their library of wit and humor, their one means of aesthetic education. And she had hitherto been contented to "exist beautifully."

The subject of the foregoing discussion was Theodore Thorndyke, a young New York man.

He had nothing distinctive about him but his real and unselfish passion for Jessica. Vices he had none, and his virtues were negative, except the very positive one of having an unencumbered income of fifty thousand a year. He was neither very good nor very bad. He was not handsome nor was he ugly. He was nothing but rich and in love, and to some of these two certainties would have been enough to constitute the other certainty,—that of a happy future passed in his society. The Thorndykes came of really good stock (not railway stock, which is the only ancestor of so many New York grandees), and they were proud of their family tree. Never, however, from its branches had depended a more insipid specimen of its fruit than Jessica's suitor, Theodore.

Jessica had considered him in every conceivable light, but she could not think of him with equanimity as her future husband. What her mother said of their straitened circumstances was all true. She felt it as only a beautiful young woman can feel poverty. She loathed her shabby gown, her hundreds of petty economies, which seemed to belittle her. She envied other women without a tithe of her good looks or abilities make brilliant matches and appear to be happy. Why must she have so many scruples prevent her being of their number? All this passed once more through her mind as she sat by the fire with her mother on that chill April day.