

JESSICA'S CHOICE.

(Continued.)

Jessica swayed her fan slowly backwards and forwards.

"I regret that you should so misconstrue me," she said.

"I don't misconstrue you," said Augusta. "I judge you by myself."

"You must pardon me if I object to that standard of measurement," said Jessica, with ceremonious coolness.

"You are a clever woman, Mrs. Thorndyke. You utter the greatest rudenesses with a point and polish which almost make them appear like civilities; but you do not deceive me."

Again Augusta commenced pushing the rings up and down her spare fingers in a flurried way.

"Why waste time, Mrs. Westalow, in telling me your opinion of me? It is not the first time that you have tried to impress me with a realization of your enmity. You are entirely inimical to me. You have been so from the first. When you came here to-day, I resolved to take the initiative and treat you with all kindness and consideration. But no woman with any self-respect—and I have a great deal—can allow herself to be insulted pointedly and repeatedly without resenting it. All idea of friendship is at an end. You hate me bitterly, and show it on every occasion; and I—pardon me again if I say that I do not love you."

Jessica's face was pale with deep feeling, and the irrepressible tears stood in her eyes. Mrs. Westalow colored deeply, and avoided her glance.

"I disdain to justify myself," Jessica went on, her voice trembling a little. "I will only remind you of what you know to be the truth,—that I refused to marry your brother, when his kindness and nobility of heart led him to urge such a course upon me. It was only when I knew that he was dying, and that it would never again be in my power to grant or deny a request of his, that I yielded to the importunity of himself and of your sister. I am cruelly misjudged by you, and, I dare say, by others like you; but as long as my own heart does not condemn me, I can bear these persecutions and slanders, humiliating as they are."

During this impassioned speech Mrs. Westalow had been divided between a desire to relent and mingle her tears with those of the beautiful pleader and a wish to escape from the effect which she felt was being produced on her by such eloquence. She was an impulsive woman, and her shallow but emotional nature was stirred by what she heard. Whilst she was debating what course to pursue, Jessica regained her self-possession, and furtively dashed away the moisture which stood in her eyes.

"What 'insult' was there in sending you the diamond pin? Why am I so grossly misrepresented?"

"It was an insult because you have supplanted Anna and myself; because out of all the jewels that should have been mine you dole out one diamond butterfly and think it a generous gift," said Mrs. Westalow, with a burst of fierceness. She had decided not to relent.

"I consider it a mistaken kindness," said Jessica. "The jewels—and until Mr. Thorndyke's will was read I never knew that you had any family jewels—were intrusted to my keeping by my husband,—your brother,—and I did not feel myself at liberty to dispose of them. I should not have considered it right to give any of the diamonds to my own family, and, as I am not at all greedy for them myself, they are simply one more in a long list of responsibilities which already cause me some uneasiness. I sent you the pin because I thought it a graceful and sisterly act on my part, and because I was foolish enough to fancy that you might derive some pleasure from it. This is the insult which appears to rankle."

"I have brought back the pin," said Mrs. Westalow. "I am glad you gave none of them to your own family. The set will not be broken."

She had had a vague idea that Mrs. Hilton and Lily were wallowing in diamonds,—that, Cleopatra-like, they might be dissolving precious stones in their tea, for aught she knew to the contrary. It relieved her mind to ascertain that the butterfly was the only one of the pins which had left its box in the solemn velvet-lined family jewel-case to wing its way to a new owner.

She put her hand into her pocket, and drew out a small box.

"This is the butterfly," she said, handing it to Jessica. "If your motives were good, I thank you."

Jessica took the box.

"And I thank you," she said, "for a valuable if painful lesson. This shall be my last attempt to gather grapes from thistles."

She rose as she spoke, and Mrs. Westalow felt that the interview was at an end. She stood for a moment silent, then said, "It would have been better to let me tell you this before I was compelled to break bread in this house,—your house," with much bitterness.

"It makes little difference," replied the widow with great calmness. "In future my hospitality shall not be thrust upon you."

"One word more," said Mrs. Westalow, taking a long breath as though to swallow the last remark. "To be honest with you, I must confess that I should never have tamely submitted to the present state of things if I could have done otherwise. I fully intended to contest Theodore's will; but no one supported me in the undertaking, and so I did nothing."

"All this is unnecessary," said Jessica. "This is nothing new. I know it already."

"Very well. Then I have said all I ever intend to say on the subject."

Mrs. Thorndyke gave a smile of infinite incredulity, but made no reply to the remark.

"Allow me to send you to the station," she said, politely.

"The carriage will be here in a few moments. I ordered it to return."

Mrs. Westalow went over to the mirror, put on her bonnet and veil, and,

after some little search, succeeded in finding her gloves. Then she turned and confronted Mrs. Thorndyke.

"It will be some time before I see you again—voluntarily," she said.

Jessica smiled. The woman was so insulting that it was almost amusing.

"Good-by," she went on. "I am indebted to you for my lunch, which was very good. Be so kind as to send me the napkin-ring marked A. T. As I remarked before, it is mine. I hope you will prosper and enjoy your ill-gotten gains. Good-by."

The situation was becoming a little strained, and when the sound of wheels were heard, both ladies experienced a sense of relief.

The rusty carriage, with the dirty driver and the lean horses, drew up. Mrs. Westalow descended the steps and climbed into the carriage, metaphorically shaking the dust of Acacia Point off her feet.

Jessica sought refuge in her own room, where her enforced calm gave way to a burst of tears.

CHAPTER IX.

When Jessica descended to the piazza, about five o'clock, the traces of the tears which she had shed were not entirely obliterated, and her beauty had suffered somewhat, though only temporarily.

Lorrimer noticed these signs of depression,—a paleness, a general languor of carriage, and a slight redness of the eyes. He felt some surprise at what he considered a new discovery,—that Mrs. Thorndyke was possessed of sensibilities. These he considered a needlessly luxurious possession for himself, but he could not help experiencing a vague feeling of gladness that he had found an additional charm in his new kinswoman.

When Jessica appeared, he was sitting, dressed in white flannels, in a long wicker chair, under the shade of the awnings. Lily, who had been playing several violent games at lawn tennis with him, reclined in another equally comfortable chair, and was fanning herself briskly.

"We are utterly dishevelled, as you see, Mrs. Thorndyke," said Paul, rising, and offering her his chair.

His look belied his words, for he had the luck to be one of the favored few who never feel uncomfortably warm.

"Miss Hilton has beaten me shamefully," he went on, as Jessica declined the proffered seat and chose a more upright chair. "I am out of practice, you see, for in Berlin one does not play tennis. There is but one set in the whole place."

"How odd!" said Jessica. "Why is that?"

"It is considered very *infra dig.*," said Paul; "and as to a man appearing without his coat, even on the tennis-ground, he would have half the city authorities about his ears in no time."

"I want to hear all about Germany," said his hostess. "I have always longed to go abroad, but have not had the good fortune."

"Don't begin anything till we have had tea," cried Lily. "We are dying for something to drink."

As she spoke, the obsequious butler appeared, bearing a great silver tray on which the Thorndyke tea-set looked undeniably rich and handsome.

Tea, refreshing and delicious as it is at all times to a lover of that beverage, certainly tastes better out of Dresden cups into which it has been poured from a silver teapot so bright and polished that one takes pleasure in looking at it. In the days of shabby gowns, maids-of-all-work, and Queen Anne hideousness in New Jersey, Lily and Jessica had always indulged in afternoon tea; and a memory of the milk which tried to be cream and couldn't, the baker's bread and questionable butter, the small allowance of sugar, often rushed into the minds of the two girls in their altered circumstances.

Now the cream was not as thin as if just escaped from a course of Banting: it was so rich it would scarcely pour. Now the bread was the freshest and the butter the most delicious that one could desire.

A pretty woman never looks more charming than when she is making tea. Paul's æsthetic taste was thoroughly satisfied as he watched his new cousin presiding over the tea-table.

When all were comfortably ensconced, cup in hand, and Mrs. Hilton had joined the party, the conversation wandered back to Germany. Paul told how for some time he had held the position of secretary of the American Legation at Berlin. Some months before, the minister had been recalled to America, for a temporary leave of absence, by pressing family affairs, and during this visit Lorrimer had been appointed *chargé d'affaires*. He went on telling many amusing anecdotes illustrative of the Germans and their mode of life, and made himself thoroughly amusing till it was time to dress for dinner.

Lily pronounced him a success. She also observed that she wished to go abroad in the autumn; but, though her sister assented to her first remark, the second remained unanswered.

After dinner, during which Jessica lost a good deal of her pensiveness and brightened wonderfully under the influence of the lively talk, she sauntered out to the summer-house on the rocks, and was presently joined by Lorrimer. He ardently desired a *tête-à-tête* with her. He had dropped the tone of bantering gallantry which he instinctively used towards women, for he felt the force of her silent dignity, which seemed to forbid anything even remotely bordering on flirtation.

Besides the natural bias which most men have in favor of pretty women, a sudden and very decided preference had sprung up within him for the lady who had robbed him of his inheritance.

As he walked across the little bridge which led to the summer-house, Jessica was sitting in the sunset light, with her back towards him. A look of sadness had again come over her face, as he observed when she turned