

## JESSICA'S CHOICE.

(Continued.)

This evening he sat with Mrs. Westalow over a wood fire which was rendered pleasant by the rawness of the April night air. He was regarding his kinswoman with a steady directness of gaze which would have been unsettling to some women. Augusta bore it without flinching. There was nothing about Paul which seemed to her new or striking. They had been brought up together.

"If you do not contest this infamous will," she was saying, vehemently, "you are not the man I have always thought you. What right had Theodore to leave everything to this adventuress?"

"Is not that rather a hard name to give a beautiful young lady?" asked Paul, in a low and singularly pleasant voice.

"I approve of calling a spade a spade," retorted Augusta vigorously.

"I remember that you always talked fine nervous English," said Paul, with a slight smile.

"Then, as to her beauty," pursued Mrs. Westalow, "to me she always looks made up. It is such bad style to have a red-and-white skin and black eyebrows, like a head in a barber's window."

"Oh, you mustn't blame the poor girl if Nature blacked her brows and rouged her cheeks. She can't help being a beauty," said Lorrimer, with quiet enjoyment of his cousin's temper.

"Oh, are *you* going to become one of her champions? Anna has been making a fool of herself already; but we must make allowance for her, for her brain is half turned with a religious mania."

"You mean that I haven't that excuse?" said Paul, laughing outright.

"Well,—do you know?—one can bear a good deal of religion in one's friends. It has a good effect on Anna. Why don't you try it?"

"Don't be so satirical, Paul. I see you haven't changed. Your long residence abroad has not improved you."

"No? I can't say the same for Westalow. I saw him in Paris, and he looked very happy."

Augusta flushed scarlet.

"What was he doing?" she asked.

"Consoling himself for your unkindness, I think," said her cousin, smiling rather maliciously.

"Don't let us talk of him!" exclaimed Augusta. "He is too disgraceful. Tell me about yourself. What brought you home just now?"

"I hardly know. A general feeling of unrest which comes upon me periodically. I am going back before autumn, as I have only a few months leave."

"Seriously, Paul, have you no intention of contesting this outrageous will?"

"Seriously, Augusta, I have not."

"May I ask why?"

"You may. First, because litigation costs money,—which I haven't got. Second, because the will can't be picked to pieces, and there is no use trying. Banks says so. It would only create a scandal."

He paused, but as if he had not quite finished.

"Well," said Mrs. Westalow, trying to keep down her scorn, "third—?"

"Oh, there is no third reason to speak of. I simply don't want to. That's all."

He sat regarding her imperturbably. She flamed out at him.

"Oh, you fool!" she cried. "You are won over by that doll-faced woman."

"I have quite a passion for dolls," he said. "Don't you remember how I used to borrow yours when we were children?"

"Oh, Paul, don't be insane!" she persisted. "Help me in this matter. I stand quite alone. Aren't *you* angry or disappointed at all?"

"Disappointed I am, of course, but not angry. Theodore's money was his own. I can't criticise his taste. He left it to somebody whom he loved more than he did you or me. Is that astonishing?"

"No, not so astonishing as this beautiful Christian spirit which you have suddenly developed. There is something back of all this, which I shall find out in time. You can't hide it from me."

"My dear cousin, I should no more think of hiding anything from you successfully than I should think of commanding the sun to stand still and expecting him to do it."

He rose as he spoke, and held out his hand.

"Good night," he said.

Mrs. Westalow ignored his hand.

"Good-night," she responded, briefly.

## CHAPTER VI.

It happened that George Carroll went once more to New Jersey to visit some friends, and before he took the train for town on the following day he walked down the street where the Hiltons lived. This he did against his better judgment, for he said resolutely to himself that he desired no further acquaintance with Jessica Thorndyke. But it is wonderful how while our will is deciding to go one way our feet, guided by our inclination, carry us another. Every one has experienced these phenomena for himself, and it is unnecessary to enlarge on the subject.

It was a most delicious day in the latter part of April. The spring had been backward, as our springs always are, but the flowers were beginning to bloom and shed their fragrance abroad. As Carroll approached the Hiltons' gate he experienced a curious feeling of satisfaction or the reverse, he could

not tell which, for leaning with her arms crossed on the top of it, and with her head laid upon them, was Jessica. Her face was averted, and she did not see him. The sun glinted on her dead-black hair and lighted it into a dull rich lustre. Her gown was severely simple, but followed the superb lines of her figure with accuracy.

George looked a moment without speaking. In that moment Beauty raised her head. She was as beautiful as ever, her skin as fair and wonderful, her color deeper and more peach-like. If she had been grieving, thought George, her sorrow had left no trace. She was so glad to see him again that she smiled brightly; then, remembering her recent widowhood, she summoned an expression of gravity.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Carroll," she said, holding out her hand to him and opening the gate. "Won't you come in?"

Carroll took the hand for a moment in one of his own, and took off his hat with the other.

"I am on my way to the train," he said, doubtfully. "It goes in ten minutes."

"There are trains at all hours," said Jessica, still holding open the gate. And Carroll, the strong-minded, the invulnerable, felt his resolutions melting into thin air.

"I will come in for a minute or two, if I may," he said. "Isn't this rather a public place for leaning on gates?"

"I was trying to imagine that I was in the real country," said Jessica, "and forgot that everybody in the street could see me. Thank goodness, we soon shall be in the real country. We move next week."

As they talked, they walked up the little path to the house.

"And what do you call the real country? Where are you going?" asked Carroll, as they sat down on the piazza in the sunshine.

"To Acacia Point, on the Hudson, about twenty miles 'from town,'" answered Mrs. Thorndyke. She colored a little. She was desperately anxious to know Carroll's opinion of her, and yet feared to hear it, too.

"Ah," he said, dryly, "your new place. You have become a landed proprietor since I saw you some time ago. How do you like it?"

"Not very much, so far," she answered, coldly, for his tone hurt her.

"You have quite been keeping the daily papers going lately, Mrs. Thorndyke," he pursued, uttering her name with evident effort.

She made a slight gesture of annoyance.

"How is *Books and Authors*? I have not read it for a week or two," she said, changing the subject: then, with a sudden impulse, characteristic of the woman, she said, "What are people saying about me, Mr. Carroll?"

She turned towards him, and flashed her great gray eyes full on his face. Some sudden emotion on his part made him so vexed with himself that he answered sharply.

"As you are not an author, Mrs. Thorndyke, it is not my business to know," he said.

She shrank back, sorely wounded.

"I made a mistake," she said, with an uncontrollable quivering of the lips. "I forgot that our slight acquaintance did not warrant my question."

He flushed crimson.

"Now I have offended you," he cried. "I am the rudest brute in the world; but I have more heart than manners. I ought to be very happy to be asked anything by you."

"Then why," she demanded, her hurt feeling hardening into displeasure, "why do you speak to me so? I know very well what you think of me."

"What?" he asked, eagerly. "I wish you could tell me; for—I don't know myself!"

"You think me the sort of woman you were speaking of last time I saw you. You misunderstand me utterly. However," she concluded, with a desperate effort at curbing her petulance, "what earthly difference does it make? You are only one of a large body of people who will always impute to me wrong motives."

"I want, above all things, a serious conversation with you. When may I have it?" asked Carroll, gravely.

"That is impossible to prophesy," said Mrs. Thorndyke, stiffly.

"You are going up the river, you say," he persisted. "May I go there to see you?"

"If you come I certainly cannot refuse to see you," she answered.

"Good! A little encouragement goes a long way with me," he said.

"In the mean time, *Books and Authors* waits for me in town."

He rose, and stood looking at her.

"You will forgive me, then, won't you?" he asked. "I shall make an able defence."

"I will accept your apology when you make it," she said.

Without offering her his hand, he turned and walked off down the gravel path, between the beds where the spring flowers were coming up. Outside the gate he paused and waved his hat, then strode out of sight.

He left Jessica plunged in an unaccountable bitterness of spirit. Somehow, she had longed to open her heart to George Carroll, and he had repulsed her. She had not been used to such treatment from the men whom she knew, and his behaviour, while it wounded her sensitive nature, thrilled her with the charm of something unaccustomed. She longed almost passionately for his approbation, and she felt that he had not accorded it to her.

As for Carroll, he went away furious with his own stupidity, as he called it. He began to think that he was misjudging Jessica, and that she might have something plausible to say on her side of the question. Many a woman had enjoyed his good graces in a mild, platonic way; he had a friendly regard and even admiration for a great many girls, but none of them stimulated his pulse or made him lose his head, and he had said to himself that the woman who should have this dangerous but delicious influence over him would be Mrs. George Carroll if he could make her so. Meanwhile, he shunned the thought of matrimony.