

JESSICA'S CHOICE.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER X.

Lorrimer did not leave Acacia Point on the Monday. His three hostesses pressed him to stay, and the days went so fast that it was Thursday before he realized that he was engaged elsewhere for the following Sunday. About a week after he had left, he met Augusta Westalow in town.

"Do you want the latest news from your new sister?" asked Paul, as coolly as if he were not putting a match to dynamite.

"So you have been there?" she said. "So you have gone body and soul over to the enemy?"

"Such a charming enemy, Augusta! You know the Bible rule about enemies, don't you?" he asked, provokingly.

"You have got some scheme on hand, I can see, Paul," said Augusta. "But you mustn't feel too sure. Other men consider that woman's millions charming, and need them more than you do."

"What do you mean?" he asked, with sudden sharpness.

"That young beggar of a newspaper man—Carroll, his name is, isn't it?—has been visiting Mrs. Thorndyke."

"Has he?" asked Lorrimer annoyed in spite of himself.

"Certainly. He is an old friend of hers. Why shouldn't he go?" answered his cousin, still provokingly.

"There is no reason that I can think of," he replied. But the thought of Carroll at Acacia Point caused him many unpleasant twinges during that day and several others.

Our young editor, truth to tell, enjoyed his visit hugely. He had not meant to enjoy it, and was rather vexed at himself for feeling so comfortable in Jessica's house.

During his short sojourn he did not see his hostess alone until just at the last. He was to leave in an hour or two, and Mrs. Thorndyke artfully introduced him to the summer-house on the rocks.

"Sit down here," she said, almost boldly. "You are the only man who tells me the truth. I want to know how I appear amidst my new surroundings."

"Well, upon my word that is a leading question," said Carroll, laughing as if he rather liked it.

"You never were given to flattery, you know," said Jessica, laughing too. "I don't know when I feel more totally crushed and trampled upon than after an interview with you."

"Then my friendship is very wholesome for you. I am the only leaven in this lump of worldliness and temptation," said George didactically.

"Yet it is a very pleasant lump," said Jessica, with a half sigh.

"And the leaven is unwelcome, eh?" asked Carroll.

"No," said Mrs. Thorndyke, smiling now, "not when it is represented by you. Now give me good advice."

So he endeavored to do her bidding, and the two talked for some time, getting nearer to each other's real feelings than they had ever been before. And George Carroll left Jessica with the conviction that she was not the spoilt, worldly girl he had always thought her, and with the sickening realization that this discovery came too late.

Being a brave man, he decided that he had better not see her any more in this confidential manner. He stuck to his word with redoubled energy, straining his faculties to the utmost to insure the success of his daring enterprise, which had suddenly become somehow so much less precious. He neglected Jessica, who felt it. Paul Lorrimer paid her the most delicate homage, which soothed her wounded pride, and thus she saw much of her new cousin and nothing of George.

Thus the summer passed without special incident. The public had almost forgotten Mrs. Theodore Thorndyke. More recent sensations were agitating it.

In the autumn she began to weary of her seclusion and chafe for a little of the old freedom. A slight attack of malaria, largely mixed with *ennui*, made a change of air imperative. In September Lorrimer had sailed for Germany in high spirits and flattering himself that he had secured a high place in the good graces of his cousin-in-law. In October he was startled and delighted by a letter from that capricious young lady, announcing that she and the Hiltons intended to spend the winter abroad.

"I want an entire change," she wrote. "I am tired of the river and the trees and the uninteresting natives who are always trying to work on my feelings and get something out of me. I have tried the Lady Beautiful business till the clergymen have asked me to stop pauperizing the neighborhood. Now, would you recommend Berlin as a good place to winter in? You are the only relative we have abroad, or friend either, for that matter. I don't want to be a tourist, but to settle down and learn some interesting things about some country. Please advise us."

I have said that Paul was startled and delighted. He had an excellent reason for feeling something besides pleasure at the prospects of having Mrs. Thorndyke all to himself. As usual, there was a woman in the case, and it was the thought of her which made him tremble. It took a long time to determine what advice he should give the Hiltons and Mrs. Thorndyke, and his mind was seriously unsettled for several days in consequence. He had intended to return to America as soon as possible and follow up whatever advantages he had gained while there. Meanwhile, he had been temporizing. The other woman in the case, who considered that she had a clear right to him, might make things very unpleasant, but then—when would he ever again have such an opportunity of winning Jessica's confidence and affection? She would be entirely dependent on him in every

emergency, for, as she said, she had no other friend in Europe. The upshot of all his fevered cogitations was that his answer to Jessica was so entirely satisfactory that the next letter which he received from her instructed him to engage for her the most charming apartments in Berlin.

CHAPTER XI.

The "other woman" was Countess Irma von Wolfenfels.

Her mother was a Scotchwoman, who at the age of five-and-thirty had still belonged to the numerous sisterhood of spinsters. She had met amid the ever-green hills of Carlsbad, old Count von Wolfenfels, a peaceable, gentle old man of retiring habits and no particular love of the sex. The Scotch lady, well-born but indigent, decided at once to marry the count, but it took the poor old nobleman much longer to decide to let himself be married. She pursued him, ill-natured people say, into more than one city, and at last he yielded his name and fortune, if not his heart, to the Caledonian enchantress.

Their only son died at his birth, but Irma lived and grew to be the pride and solace of her father. When she was twenty-seven years old, and still single, having refused a great many offers of marriage, the count died, and the mother and daughter were thrown upon each other's mercy, which was not extensive nor very tender. Each one saw and hated the other's infirmities, and, though they praised one another extravagantly in the presence of strangers, their lonely hours, which they endeavored to make as few as possible, saw many a wrangle and actual disagreement.

They lived now here, now there; to-day in Florence, next week in Berlin. They knew everybody, were received at half a dozen European courts, but not very much admired by any one who knew them well.

During his residence in Berlin as Secretary of Legation, Paul Lorrimer had met and developed a singular intimacy with the German girl. The old countess, whose wicked old head was not troubled overmuch with notions of etiquette except in public, laid no restrictions on Irma, who had certainly reached years of discretion. Paul found himself welcome enough at the rooms which the mother and daughter inhabited in the Hotel de Russie, and he amused the elder lady as much as he entertained and captivated the younger. He was the only American Irma had ever known, and she took pleasure in practising her wiles upon him. At one time Berlin society, which has a provincial love of trifles, interested itself in the affairs of the Wolfenfels to the extent of informing them, through one or two of its most virtuous ornaments, that the freedom of Countess Irma's behavior was a scandal to so proper a city as the capital of Germany. Old Wolfenfels laughed her worldly, rasping old laugh, and said in a discordant tone that she knew her daughter better than any one else, and she would answer for her morals.

Meanwhile, Irma was discreet enough in public to satisfy all the gossips from Unter den Linden to Potsdam, and the wickedest thing she had ever done in regard to outraging the *convenances* was to have an occasional conversation with Lorrimer when her mamma was not in the *salon*.

She was a woman of very striking personality. Her height was unusual, and she was certainly rather massive, but she had superb, rust-brown tresses, which she wore plaited around and around her head, a pair of fine, violet-gray eyes, which were perpetually rolling, and a mouth which would have been handsome but for its excessive mobility, which showed too much of the place where nature had fastened in her handsome teeth. She spoke English with a fluency and an accent which was charming though it sounded affected. Her accomplishments were many. She possessed what she herself called "a phenomenal voice," and Wagner was her idol. Never a season passed without a visit to Haireuth.

There was nothing modest or retiring about Irma. She had her mother's push and enterprise, and a cosmopolitan experience.

The old countess had a voice like a peacock, and a contempt for mankind in general and womankind in particular. She had seen so much of Continental laxness, told and heard so many scandalous stories, that she was a person practically unshockable—but highly respectable herself, be it understood. In person she was stoutish, bilious-eyed, and painted. Her elaborately-dressed gray head was always crowned by a widow's cap, fastened on with black, ball-headed pins.

The deceased count had been dead less than a year when Jessica decided to visit Berlin and break in on this happy circle.

It was not without trepidation that Paul Lorrimer wended his way to the Russie, to inform his fair friend of Mrs. Thorndyke's expected advent. He found mother and daughter occupied with their music and embroidery. Both looked as though they had just been having an encounter; but the atmosphere cleared at once as Paul appeared on the scene.

"Ah, Mr. Lorrimer!" exclaimed Irma, quite eagerly, and with a delicious roll of the r's in his name. "You come at the right moment, is it not, mamma?"

"It is always the right moment for Mr. Lorrimer," said the countess, with a graciousness which was unintentionally contradicted by the natural gruffness of her voice. "Irma and I were having one of our discussions. The dear child is wonderfully headstrong, like her poor father."

"Ach, lieber Papa!" sighed Irma, casting up hands and eyes. "He was a dove! an angel!"

Paul had kissed the countess' hand in good German fashion, and approached Irma almost with nervousness.

"I have something to tell you," he said, "which will interest you."

"More interest than usual?" she asked, with a little languid serpentine movement of the neck. She was sitting before the piano, half turned away from it.

"More so to me. Do you remember my cousin in America, of whom I spoke?" he went on.