

Continued from Tenth Page.

Poor little Cora, I believe if she loved a man she would have plucked enough for that. Don't think I am flouting you, Shirley; you cannot help yourself. And had you been willing to stand by me through it all, I would not have accepted the sacrifice. At the time—but why recall it? I have passed through the bitterest experience that life can hold for me, but I am living it down.

She felt dazed, bewildered. She could scarcely grasp the sense of his words. 'I do not understand you,' she cried. 'Have you forgotten your letter? Did you never read mine—mine that, out of common humanity, you might have answered?' 'Yours?' he echoed, incredulously. 'When did you write? I never received a letter from you. I wrote when I was mad with anguish, telling you that we must part. The next day, when I had grown calmer, I told you why. You are under some strange delusion if you imagine you answered either of those letters. There were only the few lines Cora Rosier received, asking her to tell me that you considered our engagement at an end.'

Shirley had listened with dilated eyes fixed on his face, which grew hard and scornful while he spoke, and the desperate anguish of that time came back to her. 'If she told you that,' she said, 'through her teeth, she lied. I have never written to her in my life.'

'Are you certain?' he questioned sternly. 'Might you not have forgotten so a trifling incident?'

'You are cruel,' she cried passionately. 'Because of long ago, you think I can never be true. I am sorry for any girl who may love you in the future, for you are too hard and unforgiving to make any one happy. Believe whom you like; but, once, you shall hear the truth, and then let us part forever. I wrote to you a mad foolish letter, saying that I loved you better in trouble and poverty than I had in prosperity. I wanted you—only you, and nothing could ever make me change. I waited for the answer, none ever came. Then I learnt that Cora Rosier was with you, later, that you were engaged. I would have given all the rest of my life then, never to have sent that letter. There is nothing more to tell, except what you heard to-day. I am going to marry Captain Kemp because he has plenty of money. It is a wicked, awful thing to do; and you will be able to despise me just a little more than you did before. Good bye!'

The lovely, flushing face, with its blazing eyes and fierce little mouth, was upturned to his. The soft voice had lost its plaintive tone, and trembled with outraged pride. 'Good-bye!' she said, and, turning went swiftly away. But light as a bird, he vaulted the style, and overtook the slender, flying figure.

'Shirley!' he cried. 'Forgive me, there has been some awful misunderstanding somewhere. I am a dense fool not to have known so. I ought to have believed in you. Shirley, say one kind word to me.'

She stopped. The anger had died from her face. 'What can I say to you?' she asked, with her lips all quivering. 'What is there left me to say; only this—that I wish that I had never met you.'

'Oh, Shirley!' he said, brokenly, 'don't say that. I cannot endure to think you are unhappy. I hoped—I believed it was otherwise.'

She was in his arms. Her face was hidden on his breast, and all the agony of a lifetime seemed centred in those moments. At last she looked up, her eyes gleaming from her white face.

'Why did she tell that lie? It was such a cruel, wicked thing to do! Since that day I found you in the garden with her, I have never known one peaceful moment. You say you don't love her, but are you quite sure?'

'My dear one,' he said, 'must you ask me that? Since the day you came to me in the churchyard at Coddington I have never thought of anyone but you. You will be the one love of my life, dearest, though I never see you again.'

'Vivian,' she panted, clinging to him, 'don't say that. You have come back to me. I would rather you killed me than left me. It is so awful without you. When I believed that you had changed, I thought I could do as the others wished, and marry Captain Kemp; but now it is impossible. I should go mad. Where you go, I will come, too. Don't tell me that I cannot be.'

'Shirley,' he said, in that grave, strong way of his, 'I must tell you so. I am poor—I am nameless—I am ruined in every way. I am going to make what I can of my life in another country; but I should be a dastard, indeed, if I let you share my shame and exile.'

'You will break my heart,' Shirley cried. 'I cannot live without you. Oh Vivian, you

don't know what these days have been! My thoughts—'

She passed her hands across her eyes; the tears were streaming from them. His handsome face was drawn with suffering, but the look of determination upon it never weakened.

He knew not what she pleaded for could never be.

He bore a dishevelled name, he was an outcast, he felt he had no right to touch her, and yet to hold her in his arms again was like a glimpse of Heaven after ages of torment.

He knew not what words he used. Afterwards he could only remember the pressure of her wet face against his, her clinging hands, her sobbing voice.

And then, when he had left her, and was striding away with the cold, keen air drying her tears upon his cheek, he heard her light, quick step behind him, and turned to find her there.

'I have not come again to beg you to take me,' she said, her teeth set tight together, 'but I have forgotten something I must tell you. Sir Martin Metherell is dying, and he wants you. He is paralyzed, he cannot speak, but he has been always trying to say one thing—it is your name.'

An expression of such fierce anger flashed across his face that Shirley recoiled. 'If I could save his life by going to him, I would not go. I will never cross his threshold again. That man's base villainy divides us to-day, Shirley. When I think of him, and the evil he has done, I feel I could shoot him in cold blood. But for his treachery, we two need not have parted.'

He left her then; he could not trust himself to say more.

She looked so white and fragile, so pitiful, with that scared expression on her face that the impulse to lift her in his strong arms, and bear her right away, was almost more than he could fight against.

And Shirley watched, with straining eyes and aching heart, until the hanging smoke and evening mist hid from her sight; then she turned, and went slowly home.

They had met and parted, and it was over.

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

So far, Cora's intrigues and manoeuvres had prospered.

She had wormed her way into the West's home, where she endeavored to make herself indispensable.

She would have, had they allowed it, waited upon them hand and foot.

She made no secret of her devotion to Vivian; he received it as he would have received the open affection of a child.

She was alone and sad, and he pitied her, so that, when she humbly pleaded to be allowed to follow them wherever they chanced to go, he willingly agreed.

That afternoon on which he bade farewell to Shirley he walked for miles, caring little where he went, so long as the way was lonely and he was undisturbed.

He knew that he had said good-bye to her forever—that his sight would never again be gladdened with her girlish grace and flower-like face.

He had involuntarily put from his life all that could make it blest.

He did not flinch from doing it, because he knew it was right; but it was worse than death to him.

It was not until the small hours of the morning that he found himself before the dingy little house which had been his home for the last few months.

Opening the door with a latchkey, he gently closed it behind him, and went into the dining-room, where a light was burning.

As he did so, someone started up from the depths of a big armchair—a little figure, clothed in a loose red gown, her raven hair all tossed about her shoulders.

It was Cora.

She rose eagerly to meet him, but her black eyes were full of a tense anxiety, as they scanned his weary, jaded face.

'Ah! monsieur!' she exclaimed. 'Pardon me for being here; but I could not rest—I could not sleep. I could not think, "Has some terrible thing befallen him that he stays away so long?" You look so strange, monsieur—ah! you draw your hand from me! Is it possible that I, your little friend, can have offended?'

His expression was sterner than himself was aware of.

Shirley's pitiful cry was ringing in his ears—

'Why did she tell that lie? It was such a cruel, wicked thing to do!'

'I have heard something to-day,' he said, 'that I cannot understand; but surely you will be able to explain the mystery.'

'You have seemed so true,' he said, 'I cannot believe this of you—and yet!—the clock behind him struck three—this is no hour for you to be sitting up; you had better go to your room at once.'

Perhaps she was thankful to escape further questioning, for she rose immediately. 'You also will try to sleep?' she said, softly; 'you are very tired.'

She hesitated, then added, with downcast eyes: 'It has all come right, then, between you and her?'

'No,' he answered; 'it can never come right.'

'I am sorry.' Then she crept upstairs, with a great smile running all over her face. 'Diu! what a fright I have had,' she cried, in a breathless whisper. 'I thought it was all over—my work all wasted. But now I shall win yet.'

She little dreamed how close to destruction all her clever planning was.

It was on the following afternoon that, as she sat over the fire, daintily embroidering a cambric handkerchief with the initials V. W., Vivian West came into the room and regarded her with stern, condemning eyes.

'I have been to the hotel,' he said, in the hushed tone of suppressed passion. 'The man you bribed to give you certain of my letters was foolish enough to speak of it to one of the women servants, who, in her turn, told another, so that, when inquiries were made, and money offered for the missing letters, these two women came forward and gave evidence against the man. He has confessed. He is waiting in the hall. He says he is quite certain that he could not fail to recognize the lady who bribed him. Her name was Mademoiselle Rozier.'

The cambric handkerchief had fallen into the grate, where a red-hot cinder, dropped upon it, quickly destroyed the delicate stitching. But Cora noticed it not.

She was found out, she must save herself as best she could.

'It is a conspiracy!' she cried, with ashen lips. 'I have no money to bribe—I was poor. No, I beg, do not call in the man! Do not subject me to the humiliation!'

His eyes were cold and hard as steel. 'If the accusation is false,' he said, 'there can be no humiliation.'

He stepped back and opened the drawing-room door, and a man, dressed as a hotel porter came in. Cora covered her face with her handkerchief and began to cry.

'Mademoiselle, may I ask you to look up for a moment?'

The clear, sternly-uttered words were a command, but Cora only cried more wildly.

He waited a moment; then, going to her gently but firmly removed her hands.

'Do you recognize this lady?' he asked. The man touched his forehead.

'Yes, sir; she is Mademoiselle Rozier, the lady that gave me the hundred pounds to have the handling of the letters before they came to you. I am sorry, sir, for having consented, but it was a great temptation.'

'You are positive that this is the lady?'

'I'll take my oath on it?'

'That will do; you may go.'

As the man went, Cora flung herself on the floor.

'Pardon me!' she cried, frantically. 'If he was tempted, how much more was I? I love you! I was jealous of her. She could never care for you as I cared for you. She would shrink from what I would gladly endure for you sake. Monsieur, remember only my devotion. I came to you when all the world was against you. I brought your mother to you. I have tried so hard, so truly to befriend you! Do not be angry with me now. Do not judge me too harshly.'

'It is not for me to judge you,' he said; the proud, hard face never softened. 'Why you did the thing I do not know. It was a vile thing to do. I cannot say that I forgive you; I do not think that I shall ever be able to bring myself to say it, not only for the suffering your deceit has brought to me, not only because it made me doubt the truth and love of one whom I should never have doubted, but because of what it cost!'

'She does not love you as I love you,' Cora moaned, and at her words the quick, hot anger blazed in his face and vibrated through his words—

'Do not speak of her in the same breath with yourself. It is an insult to her.'

She heard him going from her, and springing up, flung herself before the door, her eyes flashing with passionate excitement.

All her warm southern blood was roused by his contempt, and the bitter disappointment at the failure of her cherished scheme.

All was lost, but she would not give in without a final struggle.

'You shall not go!' she almost shrieked. 'You cannot mean the terrible things you say. I have done you no harm. I have only been mad enough to love you. Can you blame me for that? But for this I it concealed from you. I only ask to be near you, to see you, and wait upon you. Now that you have forced me to tell my secret, you take away the small affection that was mine, and despise me.'

Her avowals of love sickened him, and failed to touch him as Cora intended.

She was right when she said he despised her, and yet, remembering how entirely alone and friendless she was, he felt a certain pity for her, even in his anger.

'I regret,' he said—and his quiet emotionless tones sounded to Cora like her death knell—'more than mere words can express to you, that this should have occurred, though I am indeed thankful it has happened now, instead of later on. We did not understand one another. I looked upon you as a little friend whom I could trust. That is all over now.'

'You will not let me remain with you?' gasped Cora.

'You have rendered that impossible,' Vivian replied.

'I will kill myself! I will not live! Oh, Dieu! was ever one more broken-hearted, monsieur? Have you no pity, no compassion?'

'I have both, mademoiselle, and for that reason I now leave you.'

There was no resisting that iron strength of his.

Cora found herself lifted on one side as quietly and easily as if she had been a doll.

The door opened and closed, the hall door followed suit, and he had gone before she could make up her mind how to act.

She stood with her hands clenched and her teeth set hard together.

An odor of burning pervaded the small apartment. She crossed the room, and picking up the smouldering handkerchief, rolled it into a ball, and flung it into the flames.

'I hate him!' she declared viciously. 'Prig—dolt! I could have driven my nails into his face as he stood there. But I will be even with him yet. He shall suffer—ah, how he shall suffer!'

Her face was diabolical in its expression of cruel malice.

Then, suddenly, it changed, and she flung herself in an abandonment of despair upon the hearthrug.

'I love him!' she sobbed. 'I must have always loved him; and that is why I have so hated her. He shall never have her—never, never! If I have to die for it, he shall never have her!'

Lilian West was busy preparing for that long journey across the sea which she and her son were about to take, so that Cora remained in the drawing-room undisturbed, and there her quick and wicked brain conceived a scheme even more abominable and atrocious than any she had hitherto attempted.

Her lips were curling in a smile of triumph when a note was brought her. It came from Vivian West.

'Revenge is good,' she said, when she had read it.

Then, tearing the paper to fragments, she tossed them into the fire.

The note was so short, she could remember all that it contained.

'After what has passed, it would be painful to meet again, therefore I have decided to remain away until you have gone. Make what explanation you consider right to my mother, and rest assured that from me she will never hear the truth. With every sincere wish for your future welfare,

'VIVIAN WEST.'

'Burn, burn!' she hissed, bending over the fire, and watching the paper curl and blacken. 'Your scorn has cost you an inheritance. Shirley Lorraine shall never be Lady Metherell.'

When Lilian West returned home late in the afternoon, she was surprised to find a cab at the door, with a trunk upon it, and another being carried down the steps.

Cora stood inside the hall, neatly dressed, for travelling.

She flung herself into the elder woman's arms.

'Dear friend, I leave you. I am grieved—distressed; but I have received a telegram informing me a distant relative is ill—dying. I must go at once.'

In the surprise and hurry of the moment Lilian West forgot that the girl had always declared she possessed no relative whatever.

She accompanied her to Waterloo, took a ticket for her to a station—at which Cora had no intention of stopping, but the name of which she gave on the spur of the moment—and saw her safely and comfortably off.

That evening Cora alighted at Coddington Station, and drove to Metherell Court.

The butler's astonishment was great, when, in answer to an imperious summons, the footman flung wide the doors, and Mademoiselle Rozier stepped in, as if, as he afterwards observed, the whole place belonged to her.

Sir Martin's illness had been chronicled in the daily papers, so that Cora was aware of the critical condition in which he was lying.

Having informed the astonished, and not too well pleased, servants that she would occupy her old rooms, she ordered a fire to be lighted in the library, and a meal to be brought there.

Then she seated herself in Sir Martin's own particular chair, and looked around her with a smile of supreme satisfaction.

There was no one to turn her out—there was not a soul to interfere with her, and she registered a silent oath that she would not leave the room until she had found and destroyed the document which

gave Vivian West his birthright and inheritance.

She intended to commence the search after she had refreshed herself with food and wine.

In the meantime she sat and warmed herself, and gloated over the revenge she was about to take.

On the table beside her lay a copy of the Times.

She picked it up, and began carelessly glancing down the columns, till a name suddenly riveted her attention, and for the first time she read of the strange discovery of Dorrien.

She flung the paper aside, as a servant entered with a hastily prepared meal.

The best thing Dorrien could do, she thought, was to die, and the sooner the better.

She was thankful that he had met with even a worse fate than the one she had prepared for him.

He must have suffered torture; she hoped he would die in agony.

She did not waste many thoughts upon him, other matters of greater importance engrossed her mind, and first and foremost was the finding of Sir Martin Metherell's will.

As she swallowed the soup, her eye roved round the stately apartment, which since the owner's illness had acquired a neat unused appearance.

That the document might have been hidden elsewhere, or placed in safe hands, never occurred to her.

It was here that Sir Martin spent most of his time, here that he wrote his private letters, and thought out his lonely thoughts, and here Cora felt certain she should find what she wanted.

Directly the meal had been removed, she commenced the search.

There were several pigeon-holes crammed with neatly folded papers. These she did not trouble to look at.

There was also a writing table, with drawers on either side. Most of them were unlocked; but the top ones were fastened, and on these Cora centred her attention, trying every key she could find, but without success.

However, this was of small importance to mademoiselle Rozier.

She had had some training in the picking of locks, and, drawing a very useful little instrument from her pocket, she set to work with a quickness and deftness which did her infinite credit.

But a few moments later and she had discovered that which she sought, and her eager fingers had torn open the packet addressed to Vivian West!

With bated breath and hot, excited eyes she read the record of Sir Martin's life—his weakness, his downfall, and the remorse that had eaten into his heart.

Right through to the end she read, and then with a laugh, tore the closely-written pages across and across again, and ultimately watched them vanish in the flames.

Thus perished Sir Martin Metherell's attempt to right the wrong he had done.

Helpless, speechless, dying he lay surrounded by the wealth for which he had so deeply sinned; while his son, poor and nameless, with all the bright promise of his life blasted and ruined, was about to become an exile from his country, where he might have lived happy and honored.

But of this Cora thought nothing.

She had revenged herself upon the man she loved and the girl she hated—hated with such intense ferocity that even now she was not content.

'I would like to kill her,' she said, vindictively. 'I would like to trample her to death.'

To be Continued in our next.

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