

Continued from Tenth Page.

stars were studding the deep blue above, when at length they parted.

'Good-night, my own, my dearest one,' he said. 'For ever and for ever I will be true to you.'

Through the misty evening she went, his voice still echoing in her ears, the print of his kisses still warm upon her lips and cheek.

'I will be true to him,' she whispered, lifting her eyes to the heavens above. 'I will be true to him.'

No one heard her enter the house, and, gaining her room, she locked the door; then kneeling by the open window, she let her thoughts wander back over the past hour.

He loved her.

The very thought sent a rush of joy all through her.

She rested her cheek on the hand he had kissed, and closing her eyes, tried to imagine his arms were around her again. Madge tapped at the door on the way to her own room; but, receiving no answer, believed that her sister was asleep.

However, the slight sound disturbed Shirley's dreaming, and sent her thoughts into a more practical and less pleasant channel.

She would have to break off her engagement with Gilbert Metherell, and face the surprise and displeasure of everyone.

She thought of her mother's anger, of Madge's cold contempt.

No doubt Lady Metherell would take her to task, and condemn her conduct.

It would all be awful; but she intended to do it.

At last, that night she did; but when the morning came, she shrank more than ever from the ordeal.

At breakfast she found a letter lying beside her plate.

It was from Metherell.

He was on his way home, and might appear any day.

A feeling of dread pervaded Shirley's heart.

What would be the result of their meeting?

She trembled to think of it.

Shirley's mother and Madge were busy looking through a heap of patterns which had been sent from town, and never noticed how quite and pre-occupied she was.

But, as she left the table, Mrs. Loraine looked up to say—

'We are going into Ipswich, on a shopping expedition. You had better come, too.'

She had expected Shirley to raise objections, instead of which the girl merely asked the time they were to start.

That was a long and weary day for Shirley.

The whole time she was trying to screw up her courage to say, 'I have changed my mind and do not intend to marry Gilbert.'

Once, in the train, she almost began the sentence she had prepared; but the words died away on her lips.

'She would tell them when she got home,' she decided, and, when they reached Fairfield, they found Gilbert Metherell leaning upon the gate, smoking a cigarette.

He was looking sunburnt, and much better than usual, and had brought with quite a heap of presents for Shirley.

She wished he had not done so.

She had a miserable feeling that coils of fire were being heaped upon her head.

After dinner Sir Henry came in.

It had been thundering all the evening, and, just as he reached the door the rain came down in torrents.

'It will cool the air,' Mrs. Loraine said, as they sat in the drawing-room, listening to the storm. 'Dear me!—as a terrible clap seemed to shake the house—that was near.'

'I know it is very foolish,' Madge said in her sweet, low voice, 'but I always feel more afraid of the thunder than I do of the lightning.'

Sir Henry burst into a roar of laughter. That remark is worthy of a woman,' he declared. 'You have some sense in that head of yours, Madge.'

'Sufficient for ordinary use,' she responded calmly.

He laughed again.

He did not prefer a sharp, clever woman; as he often said to himself. 'He preferred a pretty fool.'

Madge knew this, and allowed him to imagine her one.

Shirley sat on a sofa, at the other end of the room. Young Metherell was beside her, recounting his adventures.

She liked him to talk; it saved her the necessity of doing so.

'You are awfully quiet,' he said, at

last. 'What is the matter with you?'

'I am listening to what you tell me,' she replied.

'I don't believe you are,' he declared.

'What was I telling you about just now?'

Shirley had not heard a word.

'Don't tease me,' she said, pettishly. 'I am tired, and have a headache. We have spent the day in shops. I am quite certain the image of a young man, measuring out yards of things, is imprinted on my brain.'

'I thought,' said Sir Henry, who had overheard the remark, 'that all ladies loved shopping.'

'I adore it,' cooed Madge.

'I detest it,' said Shirley. 'It tires one to death. It has left off raining has it not?'

'Which means you want us to go,' said Metherell, rising rather sulkily; while Mrs. Loraine rebuked her for her rudeness.

'You forget to pay the extra twopence for her manners when she went to school,' Sir Henry observed, with a sneer.

'I was speaking to Gilbert,' Shirley said, with a flash of her eyes at the baronet. 'I may surely say what I like to him.'

'Certainly; but he has my sympathy.'

Shirley paid no heed to this remark, but turning to Metherell, said—

'I will walk down to the gate with you.'

'In those shoes!' cried Mrs. Loraine.

But Shirley had already left the room, and Metherell followed her, after bidding the others good-night.

He found her waiting on the verandah.

'Your mother thinks you had better not come to the gate,' he said. 'Give me a kiss here Shirley; it seems an eternity since I had one.'

She hesitated, then lifted her face to his.

'I—I want to talk to you,' she stammered.

'I want to tell that—that, perhaps after all, I—I don't care enough, that—'

'Heavens Shirley!' he interrupted, 'you don't mean to say you want to throw me over? You can't go back from your word, you know.'

You did promise. Everybody knows you promised to marry me. I have not done anything to make you change. I thought of you every minute while I was away. I have not given you any cause to alter your mind; and it is not as if you had decided in a hurry. Gail! you kept me waiting long enough.'

He put his arm round her waist and kissed her. 'I have won you,' he said, and I will not give you up. So make your mind easy.'

Mrs. Loraine came to the drawing room window.

'Shirley?' she called; 'Shirley, are you standing out there, in the damp?'

'Run in,' Metherell said; 'and don't be such a little duffer again.'

He went off, picking his way down the path, which was flooded with the late rain, and Shirley, without uttering another word let him go.

That night Madge was awakened by someone sobbing on her bed.

She sat up and found it was Shirley.

'What is the matter?' she inquired.

'Are you ill?'

'I am perfectly miserable,' Shirley cried. 'For pity's sake Madge, tell me what to do. I—I don't want to marry Gilbert.'

I told him so; but he would not hear to it.'

'I should think not,' Madge said, brushing some hair from her face. 'Why, you must be mad to think of such a thing!'

'But I don't care for him,' the girl declared.

'You should have thought of that before,' was the consoling reply. 'It is late to draw back now. Do try to be sensible about it. I am not in love with Henry; still, I intend to enjoy myself as Lady Ayerst.'

'But if you cared for some one else?'

'I do not.'

'But if you did?'

'If you loved someone with all your heart, only he happened to be poor, and you—'

'You would have to wait for him, would you still marry him?'

Madge glanced sharply at her; in a flash she guessed the truth.

'I should marry Sir Henry,' she said, with quiet decision. 'If I were an heiress, I should probably marry the poor man—if of course he was a gentleman. As we are placed now, we cannot afford to think about love. Why, my dear child, supposing you were to set your affection on some poverty-stricken young man, what would become of you? You know that mother is selling capital to buy my trousseau. It must be done; there is no other way. She will do the same for you, and we shall have to make it up to her. Henry will make her an allowance, and Gilbert will, of course, do the like; so that she will be able to enjoy comparative luxury, for the rest of her life.'

'But if you jilt Gilbert, the Metherells will become our enemies; and I know Henry would do nothing for poor mother while you are at home, because you are always so rude to him. He quite dislikes you.'

'Is that two o'clock striking? Oh! Shirley, run away to bed at once, and don't be silly any longer. I am quite certain that you would hate to be poor and badly dressed for the rest of your days.'

It was all so true; every word seemed to be crushing out Shirley's poor little romance.

It was no use fighting longer.

Fate intended her to marry Gilbert Metherell.

She went back to her room, and crept into bed.

Life seemed very hopeless.

She felt too wretched for tears, but lay staring into the darkness with wide, anguished eyes.

It was some time, too, before Madge managed to fall asleep.

She was worried about her young sister, of whom, in her cold, calm way, she was very fond.

She had found it easy enough to guess the cause of Shirley's grief.

It appeared very patent to her that the unknown young man at Sea View Cottage was answerable for it all.

She had seen him two or three times, and had noticed that he was remarkably handsome; but that Shirley should have con-

descended to fall in love with him seemed, in her eyes, an awful disgrace.

She blamed herself, and her mother, for allowing the girl so much freedom.

Shirley had been spoiled, and given her own way in everything, and this was what had come of it.

Well, it would have to be stopped at once, and the best plan would be to send Shirley away on a visit.

Having arrived at this conclusion, she fell asleep, and did not wake until the maid appeared with hot water.

Shirley was out betimes.

She had felt that to remain inactive would be beyond her powers of endurance.

She chose the loneliest walk she could find.

She dreaded meeting anyone, and most of all did she dread meeting Vivian West.

Once she fancied she caught sight of him standing on the brow of a hill, and turning with wildly beating heart, she ran in the other direction.

If they met what were they to say to one another.

How could she ever tell him the truth?

How could she ever make him understand it was not all her fault?

And meet him she did.

He came round a bend of the lane, with Ralph Devitt.

'Taking one of your early walks?' the latter said, with a genial smile. 'It is quite the best time of the day, is it not?'

She made some incoherent remark about the beauty of the morning.

She dared not glance at Vivian West as he stood on one side to let her pass.

'He will know now,' she said to herself, with trembling lip. 'He will know now. Mr. Devitt is certain to tell him.'

She hurried down to a little wood, and, throwing herself on the grass, buried her face in her hands, muttering all the while, in a hard, gasping way—

'He will know now!—he will know now!'

It was the thought of breakfast, which caused Shirley to put aside her misery for the time.

If she were late, she would probably be questioned as to where she had been, and what she had been doing?

So she got up, put her hat straight, and wended her way towards home.

She was almost there, when suddenly she came face to face with Vivian West again.

He was waiting by a gate through which she had to pass.

He opened it for her, without a word.

Then their eyes met, and a little cry of fear broke from her lips.

He looked like a man who had sustained a severe shock.

He had a dazed appearance, and, when he spoke, his voice had lost its pleasant tones.

'I have been waiting for you,' he said.

'I heard a strange thing about you to-day. I want to hear from your own lips that it is a lie.'

He paused.

She was trembling, and laid her hand upon the gate to steady herself.

'It was Devitt who told me,' he continued, 'after we met you in the lane. He said you were engaged to Sir Martin Metherell's son.'

Another pause, longer than the first.

Her dark lashes hid her eyes.

To speak appeared an impossibility to her then.

There seemed no words for her to utter.

He broke the silence, with a short, bitter laugh.

'It is true, then! You are a finished coquette, Miss Loraine. I admit you fooled me completely. But why act longer? The play is over. I trust you have enjoyed it.'

His mocking contemptuous tone cut her like a knife; it sent the hot blood flaming to her cheeks.

She stretched out her hands entreatingly.

'For Heaven's sake be merciful! I did not mean to do it. I cannot help myself!'

she almost wept.

The hardness of his face never softened.

'I may be dense,' he said, coldly; 'but I fail to understand the meaning of your words. You could not help winning the love of one man, while you were bound to another? Does he know that I have held you in my arms? Does he know that I have kissed your lips? I thought him a brainless top when I met him; but I pity him now. Do not let me keep you longer.'

He lifted his cap.

She moved a few paces from him, then stopped.

'You think me heartless and wicked,' she said, piteously. 'I did wrong, I know; but I am suffering for it.'

'You!' sceptically. 'In what way can you suffer?'

'If I told you, you would not believe.'

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

'Would that be my fault? Until this hour I believed you loyal and true. I have found you utterly faithless. I could never trust you again.'

A great longing came upon her, for one kindly word, one gentle look.

'I would have been true to you,' she cried 'had they let me. I meant to break off my engagement with Gilbert Metherell. I do not love him; I do not want to marry him.'

'Then why,' he demanded, 'are you going to do so?'

'Because—because I must,' she answered weakly.

He smiled grimly.

'Because he is rich,' he said bitterly. 'You have had to choose between love and money—and, like many another, you have chosen the money. Well, I trust it will bring you all the happiness you expect it to.'

'I expect nothing but misery,' she cried, passionately. 'I wish that I were dead!'

He hesitated for an instant.

Her words had raised a wild hope, which he was striving to crush back.

'If that is so,' he said, at last, 'why not choose the love?'

'I dare not,' she faltered.

'In that case,' he said, 'let us end this interview.'

'Will you forgive me?' she pleaded.

'Forgive you!' he repeated with a sudden flash of anger. 'Forgive you for making my life harder and more desolate than it was before! Forgive you for fooling me! Forgive you for trying to break my heart, so that your own vanity might be gratified! What will you ask next?'

'I loved you,' she cried, brokenly. 'I love you now.'

'But you love yourself and the good things of this world better,' he replied. 'You say you love me—will you come to me now, as I am? Will you face poverty and hardships with me? Is your love strong enough for that?'

She went nearer to him, longing to creep with the shelter of his arms, and rest her aching head upon his breast.

'I think it is,' she said, wistfully. 'With you beside me, I should be afraid of no one.'

She laid her little hands upon his arm, and lifted her eyes, all moist with unshed tears, to his face.

He knew that he could win her then, but was too proud to take advantage of the moment.

'You think,' he said, more gently than he had hitherto done. 'I would like you to be certain. To-morrow morning, at this same time, I will be waiting here for you. If you are to be mine come to me then.'

'I will come,' she said, and, with a last long look, turned and went away.

Leaving upon the gate, he watched her until she was out of sight.

'Good-bye,' he said, aloud.

He knew she would never come to him again.

For a long while he stood there, gazing across the fields, with eyes which saw no outward things.

His teeth were set, his face was stern and grave beyond its years.

He roused himself at length by again speaking aloud.

'It shall be all work—work!' he said, 'I'll live for that alone.'

Every step that took Shirley nearer home awakened her resolve to be true to her lover.

She loved him, but was she prepared to face poverty and hardships, and endure anger and contempt for his sake?

At one moment she thought she was; at another she felt she was not.

She recalled all Madge had said, and Gilbert's indignation.

They would, she knew, be furious with her for breaking off her engagement; but, when they learnt the reason—when she told them that she intended to marry one who was poorer and obscure—what would their feelings be?

They were seated at breakfast, Madge and her mother.

They were talking earnestly together, but stopped as Shirley entered giving her an uncomfortable feeling that she had been the subject of the conversation.

However, they greeted her with smiling 'Good-mornings,' said how lovely the weather was, and showed her some wedding presents had arrived by the post.

'We shall have your coming in directly the date is fixed,' Mrs. Loraine said, with a pleasant laugh. 'Oh, I have a piece of news for you, Shirley! Your Aunt Mary is going to take you to the Isle of Wight for a few weeks, just while Madge and I are so busy arranging things. We must go up to town, and I was wondering whom I could ask to come here and chaperon you. This timely invitation has settled the difficulty. I have already sent off a telegram to say you are coming. We can all go up together this afternoon, and I will leave you with Aunt Mary.'

Shirley raised no objection.

She felt that fate had decided things for her.

She also knew that it would be utterly useless for her to refuse to go.

So, with many conflicting emotions, she packed her neat basket-trunk, and bade farewell to Coddington for some weeks, at least.

Madge noticed that her eyes were red with crying, but she made no remark about it.

As she watched Shirley's pale face and listless manner, she felt that Aunt Mary's invitation had not come a moment too soon.

CHAPTER XII.

Vivian West kept his trust; but no slim, girlish figure came across the meadows to him.

He had not expected her.

He had forced himself to believe she was far to frail and timid to dare much for his sake.

Yet, nevertheless, the disappointment was bitterly keen, and, for once, even his art seemed to lose its charm.

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