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However, Metherell, with his shaken nerves and guilty conscience, never doubted but that she knew all, and the disgrace and exposure staring him in the face filled him with the most abject terror.

Cora surveyed with curling lip. He put up his shaking hand to wipe the clammy moisture from his forehead.

"What is it?" he asked again. She drew forward a chair and sat down whilst he leant heavily against a table for support.

Life or death seemed to hang upon her answer.

"It is quite an easy matter to settle," she said. "I should like to become Lady Metherell—I wish to marry your son, Gilbert."

A groan of despair broke from him. "You know that is impossible," he cried. "You suggest it to mock me. I will end this interview now and you can do your worst."

He walked unsteadily towards the door, but before he reached it, her voice arrested him.

"I am not mocking you. I am serious and it is possible."

"What, when you know he is shortly to marry a girl he has long been in love with? Do you think he is a puppet that I can make act as I please? Ask anything in reason, and it shall be yours; but that is beyond me to grant."

"It is the one thing you wish for," she returned, "and you must manage it, or—"

She raised her eyebrows and laughed. "You know the alternative, monsieur."

He drew himself up with some attempt at pride.

"I know, mademoiselle, and I accept," she glanced furtively at him.

A moment ago she had felt quite sure of her game; now there seemed a chance that, after all, she might lose it.

"Monsieur should pause to think, she said, slowly, 'before he decides so important a question. I have only to speak and you are ruined. Not only that—you will be hanged! If I hold my tongue, you are saved, and in return I ask so small a thing—that I may marry the son of a murderer. Ah, you do not like that name! But my friend, it is yours."

"Listen to me. Monsieur Gilbert cares no more for Shirley Lorraine than he does for any other girl. He is not at all sure that he does not like me better. As for her, she marries him for his money. I, also, would marry him for his money. A word of advice and help from you, a little encouragement from me, and it will all be accomplished."

He listened to her in a dazed, helpless way, wondering vaguely if there was no limit to the depths to which he was sinking no end to the pain and horror of his wretched existence.

"You still hesitate?" Cora exclaimed. "Are you mad?"

"Mad, indeed, to listen to you," he said. Then with sudden passion: "I will not do this thing. I would rather die a hundred deaths than let one of my name call you wife. Your mother was the evil influence of my life; but for her vile tempting, I should not now be what I am. You have my answer. Go, and carry out your threats."

"I am in no hurry," Cora placidly responded. "I will wait till to-morrow evening. You may have come to your senses by that time."

He made no answer, but left, her walking with head erect, and a light in his eyes which made him look a different man.

At that moment he was ready to endure anything rather than take one step further along the road of sin and deception.

Cora Rozier's scheme had raised a tumult of passion which lent him a courage strong enough to brave the worst.

He had blackened and disgraced his name sufficiently without this crowning act of villainy.

He went out into the windy autumn night.

It was raining.

He turned his face so that the cold drops might blow upon it.

On and on he walked, maddened with the thoughts which pursued him, till, as his anger began to wane, so his courage slowly faded.

He saw himself published, before the whole world, as a criminal.

He saw the woman who, for so many years, had believed herself his wife, undecieved shunned by some, pitied by others.

Gilbert, penniless, nameless, and he would come into his rightful inheritance, scorned and hated the man he had learnt to like and trust as a friend.

Curiously enough, he shrank more from

the thought of appearing before Vivian West in his true character than any other of the terrible ordeals awaiting him.

As time passed on, the horror of what lay before him ever grew and increased.

The night became full of ghostly faces and voices.

He kept nervously glancing behind him with conviction that he was being followed.

Even in his own room this same dread oppressed him, as he sat crouching over the fire, his clothes sodden with the rain his features drawn and pinched with suffering.

All through the night the struggle went on.

Long ago he had fought with just as sharp a temptation.

He had lacked the strength to withstand it then, and in the years that had followed, he had not grown stronger.

When the faint light of early morn pierced the drawn blinds, it found him sleeping.

## CHAPTER XV.

"Life is a mistake. Nobody wants it, or enjoys it—at least, not when they are old enough to have permanent feelings. I wonder if feelings are ever permanent? People seem to get over everything."

And Shirley gave a big sigh, as she added a pink chrysanthemum to the vase she was filling.

It was a cold, dull day.

The wind rising in fitful gusts, smote the windows with angry force, and whirled the dead leaves from the ground.

Mrs. Lorraine had made a slight cold the excuse for keeping to her room, and, seated in a luxurious easy-chair, before a blazing fire, lost herself in a thrilling novel.

Shirley was arranging the flowers in the drawing-room, but she was not paying much attention to her work.

She had reached that state when nothing appears of any consequence.

So that the magenta, purple, pink, and scarlet were mixed together in a most artistic manner, till, suddenly struck with the ugliness of the whole arrangement, she pulled out the flowers with impatient fingers, and was just beginning afresh, when the room suddenly darkened.

Someone had come before the window, and was looking in.

It was Lucy Brend.

With an explanation of astonishment and pleasure, Shirley hastened to admit her friend, who entered the room with a rush of cold air.

"You are surprised to see me?—of course you are. I came here on the spur of the moment. I have just an hour to spend with you, and then I must be off again."

"You won't do anything of the sort," Shirley declared, drawing forward a couple of chairs. "Now you have come you are going to stay. I never expected to hear from you or see you again."

"I have been to mad and miserable to write," Lucy answered, slipping off her furs. "Oh, how nice it is to be near again! Dear, pretty little room! Well, Shirley, how are you? Still engaged to Gilbert Metherell?"

"Yes; but tell me about yourself."

"I am going to. I came to tell you. I could not keep it to myself any longer, and there is no one but you I can confide in."

"I can guess," Shirley cried, with a laugh. "You have made it up with Mr. Ridley."

Lucy Brend turned up her veil.

"Do I look so very brilliantly happy?" she asked, bitterly. "I have never seen Mr. Ridley since we were at Metherell Court."

"What is it, then?" Shirley questioned, anxiously. "That horrible man, surely, has not been worrying you again? Oh! Lucy, do tell me what is the matter?"

The girl bent down and picked up the poker.

"I have not known you seven years," she said; "but, all the same, I am going to stir your fire."

She spoke in a hard, sharp tone, as if keeping her voice under strong control, and rattled the steel poker amongst the coal, oblivious to the fact that it was intended for show, and the crooked bit in the corner for use.

Then she turned to Shirley, who was kneeling on the hearthrug.

"You remember," she began, "I wrote to Captain Dorrien just before I left you?" Shirley nodded.

"You broke off your engagement. Of course I remember."

"I put it as nicely as I could," Lucy went on. "It was not a very pleasant thing to have to do. Well, I did not hear from him for more than a week. Then he wrote, taking no notice of my letter. I imagined that he had not received it, or his presents, which I had returned, so I wrote again. This was his answer. You can read it."

Shirley opened the letter which was pushed into her hand.

"Read it, and burn it," Lucy said.

"MY DEAREST GIRL,"—it began,— "What freak is this? You surely do not expect me to take notice of all your nonsense. I have told my man to redirect your rings, bangles, etcetera. Are they not good enough, you foolish little woman? As this may be the case, I am sending you something extra smart, which I trust you will wear in remembrance of your humble slave."

"Now, my own darling Lucy, I must end this."

"Ever yours, JIM DORRIEN."

"P. S.—I can't help thinking that, if you really meant those silly little letters, and wanted to break faith with me, it would look awfully suspicious—almost as if you had mistaken me for Ridley that night I proposed. I think I should feel tempted to tell him so, if you treated me in that way."

"Cad!" Shirley said, through her teeth, while her eyes flashed. "What did you say?"

"What could I say?" Lucy cried. "It was true, and he knew it. I have seen him since. I—I did not know that such men

existed; but I am going to marry him. He has gained his desire. He will have the pleasure of spending my money. Oh, Shirley, if I could only give it to him! It I could only lose it! But I can't; it is all so horribly safe and secure, and it is my ruin."

"You don't mean that you will marry him?" Shirley gasped. "Let him say what he likes. Mr. Ridley will only look upon him as a contemptible cur. Don't be afraid of him."

"That is just what I am—afraid of him. We had a long talk about it one afternoon. I was staying with some people, and he happened to be near, and came over to have it out," as he said. He treated all I said as a joke. He refused to listen seriously."

"At last I lost my temper. Then I saw his real nature—so evil—so determined. I felt that it was useless to attempt to free myself from him. He said—oh, Shirley, I thought I should have died of shame!—that he knew I had mistaken him for Harold Ridley that night of the ball."

"You knew that!" I exclaimed. "My dear girl," he answered. "You made no secret of your adoration. Everyone was laughing about it. Afterwards, they thought you had been fooling Ridley, not Ridley fooling you. I think you owe me a very heavy debt of gratitude. I saved you from becoming the laughing stock of your friends; but of course, if you prefer the truth to be known, why, I am ready to publish it. Next week I shall be staying in the same house as Ridley and his lady-love. By the way, I hear they are a most devoted couple."

Shirley had risen to her feet.

"He wants horse-whipping," she said, with emphasis. "If I were only a man, he should have it, too."

"I felt I must come and tell you," Lucy said. "I have brooded over it so long by myself, I felt I could not bear it another day. I told him that all he had said was true, and begged him to release me from an engagement which was hateful to me."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He was sorry, but it was impossible. And then, quite quietly—as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world—he owned that he only wanted to marry me for my money, and that we need be husband and wife in name only. Before he left, that afternoon, I had agreed to his conditions. You think me a fool, but what else was there left me to do?"

"I think," Shirley replied, "that I should have preferred a man like Harold Ridley knowing anything than that Captain Dorrien should force me to be his wife."

"Wait till you have the choice," Lucy said, with a dismal attempt at a laugh. "I chose what appeared to me the lesser of two evils. I dare say I shall be able to bear it; but the other—oh, Heavens, the shame—the degradation!"

She hid her face in her hands.

Shirley saw that even her ears were scarlet, and waited in silent sympathy.

There seemed nothing for her to say, nothing to propose.

It was all awful; but there appeared no way of making it any better.

She thought again that life was a mistake.

Then Lucy looked up with a stiff little smile.

"I am not going to talk about it any more," she said. "I have unburdened my mind, and feel better for it. How are your mother and Midge? Tell me all the news. Is this clock right? I must not lose my train."

Shirley begged her to remain the night, but she declared it was impossible.

She was staying with friends, and they had a dinner-party that evening.

There was just time for a chat, and some lunch, before starting for the station, where Shirley saw her friend safely into a carriage, and then watched the train bear her away.

She felt dejected and miserable, as, leaving the platform, she passed through the small, bare waiting-room into the quiet road beyond.

The hedges were brown and wintry-looking, the sky hung low and grey, and the wind moaned cheerlessly, over the dreary marshes.

Shirley turned her back to the village, and walked towards the heath, covered now with dry golden-brown bracken.

Fighting with the wind, she made her way along one of the many narrow tracks, walking with bent head, and flying skirts, till, flushed and breathless, she paused at length to look back over the way she had come.

As she did so, something sharp and cold stung her cheek, and in another instant the storm—which had been gathering all the

morning—broke, and the air was full of blinding sleet and driving hail.

Shirley drew her breath in a gasp, then looked around for some place of shelter.

About half a mile off, a small thatched cottage stood in a hollow.

She began running towards it, but the heath was exposed to the full force of the hurricane, and at times it was as much as she could do to stand.

It was exhausting work, struggling in the very teeth of the raging wind.

She was beginning to despair of ever reaching the cottage, when a figure loomed through the whirling white mist, a strong hand took hold of her arm, and a voice she loved beyond all other voices shouted to her through the storm—

"Lean on me. I will help you."

She forgot her fatigue and the biting cold, and all her unhappiness seemed to melt away beneath the magic touch of that strong, gentle hand.

She no longer cared how far away the cottage might be.

She would have liked to have gone on just so for ever and ever.

The click of a gate broke the spell.

The next moment, she was standing in a small, neat kitchen, while Vivian West asked the woman to give them shelter from the storm.

She was a pleasant, kindly body, and welcomed them right warmly, stirring the fire to a ruddier blaze, removing Shirley's wet jacket and hat, and making some tea for her visitors—talking all the while to Vivian West, who listened as if the various ailments of her children and the daily occupation of her husband were matters of great interest to him.

Having spread a coarse cloth upon the table, and laid the tea things upon it, she withdrew, saying she had her washing to see to in the back.

They heard her clatter away over a stone floor, a door opened and slammed, and there was silence, save for the hailstones beating on the tiny window.

"Will you not pour out some tea?" Vivian said; "it will refresh you."

Shirley turned round, and lifted the great brown teapot with a trembling hand.

"It is too heavy for you," he said, "let me do it."

To the girl it was perfect bliss to be waited on by him.

He was not quite so cold and stern as usual, his voice had a more friendly ring—at least, so she fancied.

He laughed at the size and thickness of the cup, as he handed it to her; then, asking her permission, lighted a cigarette.

"It is fortunate I chanced to be coming your way," he said. "You were tired out, were you not?"

"I was just beginning to despair," she answered. "I seemed to have been walking for miles, yet never got any nearer. I think I should have given it up if it had not been for you."

"You had not many more yards to go," he said. "It does not leave off soon, I will send a fly from the village for you."

"Please do not think of taking so much trouble," she cried. "I shall be all right, and it is certain to clear up soon."

He got up, and looked from the window. "It is very black at present," he said, then he drew out his watch. "A quarter-past three. I will wait till half-past."

"Are you in a hurry?" she asked.

"Rather," he answered, resuming his seat by the fire. "There are one or two things I must attend to this afternoon, as I am leaving Coddington to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" Shirley repeated, faintly. "Are you going for long?"

"It may be for ever," he replied, lightly, knocking the ash from his cigarette. "It is just possible I may come down for a week or so next summer."

Shirley thought of the long, cold winter—the dull, dreary days—and shivered.

She felt suddenly very tired, her head ached.

She put the cup upon the table with a little rattle, which overbalanced the spoon.

Vivian picked it up.

"My portrait," she said; "is not that to be finished?"

"It is finished," he said. "I put the finishing touches this morning. You were anxious not to sit again, so I managed without you."

Shirley stared into the fire until her eyes ached.

He was going, she would see him no more—that was all she thought of.

She did not ask where he was going—it did not seem to matter, nothing seemed of any consequence just then.

"When next we meet," he said, breaking the painful monotony of her thoughts, "I suppose you will be Mrs. Metherell? Sir Martin tells me the wedding is to be in the spring."

She said, "Yes."

She felt it was cruel of him to talk of this now.

Surely she was wounded enough. He smoked in silence for a few moments then tossed the end of his cigarette into the cinders.

"You are looking very tired, Miss Lorraine," he said. "I will go now, and send a carriage for you."

He went to look for the woman, paid her for the trouble they had given, and told her to take care of the young lady until she was called for; then he returned to the kitchen, and stood buttoning his coat.

Shirley had gone to the window, and was watching the storm with unseeing eyes.

She felt that the last moment had come—that they were about to part forever.

Her heart was torn with anguish.

"You will not have long to wait," he said. "Good afternoon, and good-bye."

He was going—going without even a hand-shake.

She turned her mutely beseeching eyes to his.

"Shall I not see you again?" she said, unsteadily.

"I think not," he answered. "I have told the woman to look after you. I trust you will not take cold. I will see that there is a rug for you in the carriage."

She took a step towards him, holding out her hand.

"It is really 'Good-bye,' then?"

"Yes," with a pleasant smile. "After to-day, Coddington will know me no more."

"I am sorry you are going," she said. He was still smiling.

"It is good of you to say so."

"You think," she cried, with quivering lip, "that I do not mean it."

"I think," he said, very quietly, "that neither my going nor my coming can affect Miss Lorraine."

There was a rush of wind and sleet as the door opened; then it closed, and Shirley was alone.

She stood quite still, like one stunned; then, suddenly awakening to the fact that he had gone, and that every second was widening the distance between them, she rushed to the door and dragged it open.

The frozen rain beat in her face.

She called his name, but the wind carried her voice away from him.

Already he was almost out of sight. She waited there until he had gone, then slowly returned to the cottage.

A deathly stillness seemed to pervade the kitchen.

She went to the fire and held her numb hands to the blaze.

His cigarette lay amongst the cinders.

The air was still faintly scented with tobacco smoke.

She closed her eyes, and fancied him still sitting there.

After a time the woman came in and talked to her, and then at length the fly arrived, and she drove back to fairfield.

Gilbert Metherell met her on the threshold.

She saw, in a glance, that he was not in the most amiable frame of mind.

"You are perfectly mad!" he exclaimed. "The idea of going out in this weather!"

"You came out in it," she returned.

"Like a fool, I came to see you," he answered, crossly.

"Has mother been anxious?" Shirley asked.

"I believe she was until your friend came bustling around here, to tell us of all the wonders he had done. I had a jolly good mind to kick him out."

"And why?"

"The hot blood was tingling in her cheeks. 'Because I object to the fellow.'"

"Well, you can make yourself happy—he is going away."

"I could have told you that. It is about time he cleared out of this place. We don't want those sort of fellows loafing about."

Shirley regarded him with darkened, angry eyes, and a contemptuous curl of the lip, which irritated him more than any words could have done.

He followed her into the drawing-room, where an afternoon tea table had been placed near the fire.

The room looked warm and cozy, and two people might have spent a pleasant hour or so there, had they only been the right two.

Gilbert kicked a footstool out of his way and frightened the cat from the rug, where it had been blinking and purring in the warmth.

Shirley at once picked it up and kissed it, wondering, as she did so, if anyone could be more odious than her companion.

"Put that wretched animal down," he commanded. "If I had my way, every cat should be shot."

"It is rather a good thing for the cats that you can't have your own way," she responded coldly.

"I'll shoot every beast that comes near me," he declared, wrathfully.

She gave a little disdainful laugh.

"How bad tempered you are! Do you know, I am growing rather tired of your tempers."

"You'll have to put up with them, anyhow," he returned, surlily.

"Don't make too sure about that," she said, a tremor of indignation in her voice. "I am tired of that threat," he sneered. "I am not afraid of your jilting me."