

Continued from Tenth Page.

against the window-pane, the wind howled dimly.

'You are so selfish,' Mrs. Loraine said, peevishly. 'You never study my tastes. For years I have promised myself this visit, and now you do nothing but complain.'

'I am not complaining,' Shirley argued. 'I merely mentioned the fact that it is rather depressing.'

Mrs. Loraine moved impatiently in her chair.

'You may not have actually said more, but your look—well, you are growing positively ugly—you look as if you had the cares of the whole world on your shoulders. If I were Gilbert, I should certainly break off my engagement.'

'I only wish you were Gilbert, then,' Shirley declared, recklessly. 'I don't want to marry him. I hate the thought of it. Oh, mother, indeed I cannot do it!'

Her voice was trembling with suppressed sobs.

She flung herself on her knees beside Mrs. Loraine, who stared at her with eyes wide with horrified surprise.

'What are you raving about?' she gasped. 'For Heaven's sake, don't let anyone find you in this ridiculous position. You accepted Gilbert to please yourself. I am sure—plainly—I never attempted to persuade you. It is too late now to change your mind. Oh, dear, what a troublesome, obstinate girl you are!'

Shirley slowly rose to her feet, the passionate entreaty dying out of her small pale face.

'If Gilbert were a poor man,' she said, 'you would not want me to marry him.'

'I should think not, indeed!' cried Mrs. Loraine. 'Poverty is an evil we should all avoid. Dear me, if only Madge were here, she would know how to convince you; but it upsets me so terribly; my nerves, and one thing and another—'

Mrs. Loraine's utterance became drowned in tears.

Shirley walked back to the window.

Her own eyes were dry and hard, as she stared into the forlorn and dismal garden.

'I don't know what to do with you,' Mrs. Loraine began, after some minutes of silence had elapsed. 'I am sure I am ready to do anything to please you, if you will only be reasonable, and not try to bring disgrace upon our name. I have had so much trouble. I really do not feel equal to bearing any more. I often think you would be far happier if I were in my grave.'

'Don't!' Shirley implored, with a quick indrawn breath of pain. 'I—I will marry Gilbert, if it means so much to you. I would do anything rather than make you unhappy. I'll stay here—I will do just as you like.'

Mrs. Loraine sniffed, and wiped her eyes.

'I have no desire that you should sacrifice yourself for me,' she said, resignedly. 'If you really find this place dull, we will go home.'

She had begun to find it terribly "slow" herself, but would not admit it.

After that it was quite useless for Shirley to declare her willingness to remain where she was.

Mrs. Loraine insisted upon a speedy return home, and a week later they were travelling back to Coddington.

Shirley's heart beat quickly as once again she stood upon the well-known platform, with the scent of the sea in the keen fresh wind which blew in her face and tumbled her hair.

Everyone seemed glad to see them, too, and Mrs. Loraine was quite gracious and smiling.

'After all, it is nice to be home again,' she admitted, looking around her own pretty, tasteful drawing room. 'I did not say so before; but Sarah Spencer had not improved, and as to Mr. Spencer—well, he is an old bore. I don't know how we endured him for so long. We have actually been away nearly six weeks.'

'Thank goodness it is over!' Shirley fervently exclaimed.

She was looking brighter and happier than she had looked for some time.

Mrs. Loraine glanced at her, and laughed pleasantly.

'After all, I believe you were home-sick,' she said. 'Run and take your hat off and let us have some tea. I suppose Gilbert will be round here in a few minutes.'

But the evening passed away, and young Metherell did not come, nor did he appear particularly early in the morning; in fact, the luncheon-gong had just sounded as he rode up to the gate.

Shirley was running downstairs as the maid opened the front door.

'So you have come back at last,' he said.

'At last, I am thankful to say,' Shirley replied. 'Have you come to lunch?'

'No; I have only brought a message from the mater. She has an "At Home" on to-day, and hopes you and Mrs. Loraine will come. Here is the invite.'

He threw an envelope on to the hall table, then regarded her in a sulky, unwilling way.

'We have been unpacking,' Shirley said; 'but mother will be down directly. Will you come in here?'

'I don't think I can wait,' he said, beating his leg with his riding-whip. 'My bag won't stand.'

'Then I will take this up to mother.'

She ran upstairs with the invitation, while Metherell continued to beat his riding boot.

During the last few weeks he had almost forgotten Shirley Loraine, and had believed himself in love with Cora Rzier.

Now, as he once again saw how pretty and charming his old love really was, he felt undecided as to which held first place in his shallow heart.

Silly, he was very certain that Shirley had treated him badly, and he did not intend to be too nice to her until she had expressed some regret for her behavior.

But, as she had no thought of doing any thing of the kind, he went away in a rather worse temper than he had arrived in.

Mrs. Loraine accepted Lady Metherell's invite for the afternoon, and having arrayed herself in her new autumn visiting costume, she seated herself in the pony-carriage with Shirley and drove over to the Court.

They were rather late.

Some thirty or forty people were distributed about the drawing room.

There was subdued pleasant chatter of cultivated voices, the scent of hothouse flowers, and the strains of a piano, to which no one was listening.

As Shirley followed her mother into the room, her gaze travelled over the assembly, noticing what friends were present; bowing and smiling to those she knew, she made her way to Lady Metherell, who, seated on a couch, was conversing with a young man.

As Lady Metherell rose to welcome her guests, he stood up, leisurely, and, moving aside, entered into conversation with a couple of men.

'Why, Shirley,' her ladyship exclaimed, taking the girl's hand, 'you have lost your roses! My dear child, have you been ill?'

Shirley never quite knew what reply she made.

Lady Metherell seemed a long way off, and the room swimming round her; while through the hubbub of voices, one sounded clear and distinct—it was Vivian West's!

The last few weeks had wrought a great change in Vivian West's life.

Coddington had suddenly awakened to the knowledge that he was both clever and agreeable—that he was, in fact, the coming man—and no one could make enough of him.

Perhaps the warm praise bestowed upon a picture of his in one of the exhibitions had something to do with this.

Anyhow the young fellow's luck seemed to have turned at last.

The painting sold for some hundreds of guineas, and a description of the artist, with his portrait, appeared in several magazines.

It had come about so quickly and unexpectedly, that Vivian West could scarcely realize that the days of struggle and obscurity were over.

His good fortune made no perceptible difference in his manner, or mood of living.

He kept on his rooms at Mrs. Kemp's, and received all overtures in that quiet, pleasant way which showed neither anxiety to make friends, nor an unwillingness to do so.

This was his first visit to Metherell Court, though he had received more than one invitation from Sir Martin.

Lady Metherell was already charmed with him, much to Gilbert's annoyance, for Coddington gossips had been ready enough to inform him of Shirley's acquaintance with the artist, and jealousy had added to the dislike he had from the first felt for him.

'You see we have your painter fellow here,' he said, seating himself beside Shirley. 'Can't understand my people taking up a man like that. Gad! they'll feel properly sold if he takes a fancy to some of the plate.'

'Does he look like that sort of person?'

she asked, coldly.

The faintness which had seized her when she first saw Vivian West was beginning to leave her; the mist which had come before her sight was clearing away.

She found herself sitting but a few yards from the man she loved so passionately.

He was standing on the big bearskin rug before the fire—the handsomest man in the room, but, apparently, quite unconscious of the fact.

Shirley longed to watch him.

All the past weary weeks she had hungered for a sight of Vivian, and now she was sitting in the same room with her ideal, so close that she could have spoken to him, yet she scarcely dared glance in his direction.

She listened to the pleasant tones of his voice with a dull aching at her heart, awakening suddenly to the fact that Gilbert Metherell was impatiently asking some question of her.

'What do you think?'

She regarded him blankly.

'I beg your pardon. I did not hear you.'

'You have not paid the slightest attention to anything I have said for the last five minutes,' he returned, crossly. 'I merely asked you what you thought of that little girl over there, in black?'

Shirley followed the direction of his eyes to where a small, slight girl was demurely talking to Mrs. Loraine.

'Rather pretty,' she said, indifferently. 'Who is she?'

'Madame Rzier's daughter,' he explained. 'She turned up here, knowing nothing

of her mother's death. Poor little thing, it was an awful shock for her.'

Shirley looked with more interest at Cora.

'Is she staying here?' she asked.

'Rather!'

Gilbert replied, twisting up his small, fair moustache. 'She is a ripping good sort, I can tell you, nice and chummy, with none of the grand stand-off ways you are so deuced fond of.'

'She had better change places with me, then,' Shirley said, with a poor little laugh. 'I am quite ready to retire.'

'Too late, my lady—the gates are closed,' he declared.

He was no longer very desperately in love with Shirley; but, at the same time, he was not quite prepared to give her up.

She was the prettiest girl in the county, and about her there was an air of distinction which Cora Rzier had not.

Besides which, he had cleverly put two and two together, and had arrived at the conclusion that Vivian West was in love with Shirley, and it pleased his small nature immensely to possess what another man desired, especially if it chanced to be a man he disliked and envied.

'It is never too late to mend,' Shirley said, rather deeply.

She wished it was time to go home.

It was awful having to sit there, chatting and smiling, when feeling so utterly miserable.

Sir Martin, catching sight of her, made his way to her seat.

'So glad you have come back,' he said, warmly. 'I missed your bright face. Ah, thanks, Gilbert!' as young Metherell vacated his chair. 'And so you have been enjoying yourself in Devonshire?'

'It would be nearer the truth to say vegetating,' Shirley said.

'Is that so? Well, it has not agreed with you; you are looking thin. I want you to come and stay with us here. It will cheer us up; we are very dull. The place is—like a grave.'

He spoke in a monotonous tone of sadness; no smile brightened his grave, worn face, and always, as he talked, his eyes moved restlessly about the room as if seeking for some object.

No one would have recognised him as the same man who, a few short months, before had so proudly and so gaily planned the celebration of his son's coming of age.

Shirley looked at him pityingly.

'It is you who are looking ill, Sir Martin,' she said. 'I do not believe you take any care of yourself. You ought to go away for a thorough change.'

'I am all right,' he answered, hurriedly, as if not caring for the subject. 'Have you heard from your sister lately?'

Shirley was about to reply, when her words were arrested by an expression of absolute horror which crossed his face.

It was but for an instant, and then he was gravely listening to Core Rzier, who had just slipped into a vacant chair in front of him.

'Ah, Sir Martin!' she exclaimed, in her quaint foreign way. 'Will you not introduce me to mademoiselle? I already know madame her mother.'

Sir Martin did as he requested.

Shirley frankly held out her little gloved hand.

'I am glad to know you,' she said. 'Mr. Metherell has been telling me that you and he are great friends.'

'Ah, but that is kind!' with a shrug of the shoulders. 'I am very humble, I assure you. I did not aspire to so much.'

'You have been here for some time, have you not?' Shirley continued, by way of making conversation.

'Yes, some time; and I have heard, oh! so much of you.'

'Indeed?' with a slight smile.

Cora glanced around her.

'There are many people here. Are there not?' she said. 'But, ma foi, I have never seen a handsomer man than the one standing there! Are you acquainted?'

'I do not know everyone here,' Shirley said, evasively.

She knew, without looking whom the girl meant, yet shrank from speaking aloud the name that seemed forever in her thoughts.

Cora turned to Sir Martin.

'Tell me who he is,' she said. 'One does not often see so fine a face.'

A gleam of pride came into Sir Martin's eyes as they rested on the young fellow.

'That,' he said, 'is Vivian West, the artist.'

'Vivian West!' Cora repeated, below her breath; adding aloud: 'Vivian West—I know the name!'

'That is possible,' Metherell replied, evading the dark eyes now fixed on his. 'The name has lately appeared in many papers and magazines. He is a rising artist, and likely to become a great one.'

Cora nodded.

'Indeed—you must feel proud of him.'

Sir Martin started guiltily.

He read a hidden meaning in her words.

For one awful moment he believed she knew the truth, that in some way she had discovered his secret.

Then he rallied his failing courage, and answered her.

'I am, indeed, proud of his acquaintance.'

Cora smiled.

She had noticed the momentary hesitation, the nervous twitching of his lip and the way in which his long, thin fingers had clenched together.

She felt that at last she was about to probe the mystery.

Of late she had begun to look upon the whole affair as altogether hopeless.

Spy, and listen, and strive as she would, she made no progress in bringing the murder home to Sir Martin Metherell, and already had begun to give up all thought of ever doing so, when she suddenly found herself face to face, as it were, with the very person she desired, of all others, to meet.

Her heart beat fast with excitement, the bright colour glowed in her cheeks.

She left her seat, and waylaid Gilbert as he returned from having a cigarette in the smoke-room.

'Mon ami,' she exclaimed, laying a detaining hand upon his arm, 'I want you to

introduce a gentleman to me—Mr. Vivian West.'

Metherell shook his head.

'I don't introduce upstarts to my lady friends. Don't want you to run the risk of being insulted.'

'Ah! you do not like him?'

'Don't know the fellow, and don't want to,' Gilbert replied, with his grandest air.

'But I want to,' Cora insisted; adding, imperiously: 'I believe I know something about him. I would like to discover if I am correct.'

'What is it?' Metherell questioned, suspiciously. 'You are taken by his handsome face—you girls are such fools. If you do know anything about him, it isn't to his credit, I bet.'

Cora pursed up her lips.

'You are right. If he is the man I believe him to be, you will have the pleasure of—showing him up.'

'By Jove! that will just suit me,' he declared, with a loud laugh. 'Come on, and let us go to him.'

Cora followed her guide.

What tools men were, and how easily managed, she thought, and then found herself suddenly and unceremoniously brought into Vivian West's notice.

'I say, West, let me introduce you to this lady—Mademoiselle Rzier.'

Cora lifted her great southern eyes to the young fellow's face with a little deprecating smile.

'Ah! you English, you are so—so brusque, you alarm me with your quick ways. I say to Monsieur Metherell, I would like to know Monsieur West some day, and he races me to you, and flings me at you.'

'I am deeply grateful to Mr. Metherell for having been so kind, Vivian courteously replied.

From across the room Shirley saw them talking together.

It seemed to her that, for the remainder of the afternoon, he neither looked at nor spoke to, anyone else.

Shirley was a universal favorite, and was generally the centre of a group of gaily chattering people.

None knew with what an effort she talked and laughed, or how she longed to escape from them all and be alone.

Unfortunately for her, Mrs. Loraine was thoroughly enjoying herself, and had no intention of being amongst the first to go.

In fact, the room was almost empty before she rose from the comfortable seat she had occupied during the afternoon.

'I want Shirley to remain to dinner,' Lady Metherell said, sweeping up to them. 'I have just persuaded Mr. West to do so, and we shall be quite a pleasant little party. This is our first attempt at gaiety since that terrible tragedy. Sir Martin wants waking up. He simply mopes from morning till night. You have no other engagement, have you, dear?'

Shirley wildly wished she could say, 'Yes.'

She had thought the ordeal just over and now it was to be prolonged for several hours.

'I really cannot stay,' she cried, seeking some excuse. 'My dress—'

'I will send to Fairfield for that.'

'And, indeed, I do feel rather tired—'

'You shall not stay late.'

'It will do for a world of good,' Mrs. Loraine declared. 'Like Sir Martin, she wants waking up.'

Shirley saw that it was hopeless, and said no more; but accepted the invitation with as good a grace as she could assume.

'We do not dine till seven, so you will have time for a rest,' Lady Metherell said kindly, patting the girl's shoulder. 'It will be like old times to have you again.'

Shirley smiled.

Those old times seemed so very far away.

She wondered it she could really be the same girl who had been so carelessly happy in those days.

She went up to the room that had been prepared for her and, drawing an easy-chair to the fire, curled herself up amongst the cushions, and closed her eyes.

Sometimes she sighed and moved uneasily, as if her thoughts were painful ones, and then something glistened on her lashes and fell upon her cheek.

A knock at the door roused her with a start, and she hastily passed her hand across her eyes.

It was only one of the maids with her dress, which had just come from Fairfield.

The girl laid it upon the bed, turned on the electric light, and brought in the hot water, then inquired if she could assist Shirley to dress.

The latter declined the offer.

She hated the thought of having a ser-

vant's prying eyes watching her every charge of expression.

In her present state it annoyed her even to have the girl moving about the room, and directly she found herself alone again, she locked the door and resumed her seat by the fire.

The little enamel clock on the mantelpiece ticked the minutes away, till at last it struck seven.

Shirley jumped up in surprise.

She had no idea it was so late.

Dinner was at seven.

With quick fingers she changed her walking-costume for an evening gown of old rose satin, ran a diamond dagger through her hair, and fastened a string of pearls round her slim white neck.

As she did so, the gong sounded.

She was ready just in time.

With bright eyes and flushed cheeks she ran downstairs, to find the drawing-room empty, though, the next moment, two men came from the conservatory—Sir Martin Metherell and Vivian West.

'Down already, and I have not changed!'

Sir Martin exclaimed. 'Dear me, I must hurry off.'

p>'I thought I was dreadfully late,' Shirley said. She had recognized young West with a slight bow, which he returned. 'I heard the gong some minutes ago.'

'That was the first, surely,' Sir Martin said, consulting his watch; we dine at 7.50 to-night. Did they forget to tell you? I have just been arranging with Mr. West to paint your portrait; as you will so soon become a Metherell, I should like to have it placed in the gallery. Now, my dear fellow, you must arrange with this young lady as to sittings, dress, etc.'

And, almost before Shirley had realized what was happening, she found herself alone with Vivian West.

He, at least, appeared perfectly indifferent and self-possessed.

She noticed in her quick woman's way, how handsome he looked in his evening-dress.

Then he spoke.

'Sir Martin is anxious that I should begin your portrait at once.'

'Is he? I don't think I care to sit for it.'

She was afraid he would hear the quiver in her voice.

If he did, he showed no sign of having done so.

'That, of course, must rest with you,' he replied. 'But you must make up your mind soon.'

'And why?'

'Because my stay in Coddington is drawing to a close.'

'You are going away?'

She felt her lips grow white as she put the question.

'Yes,' he said, lifting the photograph from a table, and looking at it. 'I am going away. I have already stayed far longer than I originally intended.'

'And your picture,' she faltered; 'your picture of "Memories"?'

He put