

Continued from Tenth Page.

while his heart was banging like a leaden weight and one desperate thought filled his mind—how to escape.

When Cora had walked away with him, she had waited until well out of ear-shot of the others before she had spoken; then she said with a laugh—

'How odd, my friend, that we should meet again!'

'I am glad,' he cried. 'I swear I am glad. I was drunk—I was mad. I will never attempt to lay a finger on you again.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'That is what you say. But your words they are not worth that!' with a snap of the fingers.

'On my honour—'

'Your what? Surely monsieur is talking of what he does not understand. A pig might as well imagine it had wings, as for Captain Dorrien to imagine he has honour.'

'How, then, can I assure you?'

'It is impossible. But—your pardon has a price.'

He looked at her eagerly.

'If it lies in my power,' he began; but she held up her hand to stop him.

'I cannot discuss it now. Meet me to-night in the plantation, at half-past eight.'

The wild hope which had leapt to life in Dorrien's breast had died out.

Had it been a fancy, or reality, that as Cora had given the money to the Frenchman, he had seen her make sign towards the plantation?

He shuddered.

They meant to get him there, and do him to death.

'You forget,' he said, 'that I have promised to go up town with Metherell. I must wait for your terms till I return.'

She smiled wickedly.

'No, I think not. You shall hear my terms first, and then go to town. What I have to say will take but a few minutes; you can catch your train afterwards. That way is a short cut to the road. It can be arranged in this manner: You can slip off without seeing Gilbert Metherell, but leave word with one of the servants that you have walked on. He will go in the carriage, and take you up on the road. Do you comprehend?'

'Yes; but it is not possible for you to say what you have to now? We are quite alone.'

She turned upon him, her eyes flashing.

'Look here, Jim Harland, you murdered my mother; you attempted to murder me. If I did the right thing, I should give you up to justice instantly. I am kind—I speak of pardon—and you are not satisfied.'

'You couldn't prove a thing,' he said, with sulky defiance. 'If you attempted to harm me, I'd show you up for what you are. You have not a single witness. No one would take your word.'

'Make not too sure,' she warned him. 'I have proof.'

'It is a lie.'

'Trifle with me, and you will see if it is a lie.'

It was one; but she spoke with such assurance, that he believed her.

'Will you meet me, or will you not?' she demanded.

'I will,' he said.

'If you play me false you will regret it. I shall not attempt to.'

'There is one thing I desire to know. What had Sir Martin to do with the murder of my mother?'

The surprise he showed at the question was genuine enough.

'Sir Martin?' he exclaimed.

'Did he not connive with you? Did he not assist, or shield you? I want the truth.'

'I know nothing about it,' he declared. 'I was out of my mind, the other day, when I said what I did. I don't want possessed me. I—I had nothing to do with it.'

'Do you take me for a fool,' she questioned scornfully, 'that you talk such idle trash to me? Answer me, yes or no. Had Sir Martin a hand in the crime?'

'Don't talk so loudly—somebody may hear.'

'Yes or no?'

'No, then. What made you think he had?'

'Nothing, my friend, nothing. Let us now enter the house. Gilbert seems as if he did not intend to return just yet. And

I am still stiff and sore from your little playfulness upon the cliff the other day.

Do not forget, Monsieur Jim. In the plantation, at half past eight, to-night.'

No wonder Dorrien found it difficult to eat or talk.

It was eight when they rose from the dinner table.

In another half-hour who could have told what might have happened?

'So you and Gilbert are going up to town?' Sir Martin said to Dorrien, as they left the dining-room together. 'I can't think what can be detaining him.'

'He will turn up in time,' Dorrien said. He had not a thought to spare to Gilbert; his whole mind was in a torment of

Dora was in the hall.

'The night is so beautiful,' she said. 'If I were you, Captain Dorrien, I would walk to the station.'

He gave a ghastly smile.

'It is not time yet,' he said.

Never before, in the whole of Dorrien's existence, had the moments flown so quickly; all the clocks in the place were calling out the half-hour, before he felt he had had time to make any plans.

He was in his room sitting on the edge of his bed, his head clasped in his hands, when there came a gentle knock at the door.

It opened a little way and Cora looked in.

'It is half past eight, monsieur. Go first and I will follow you.'

He got up and went down stairs.

Sir Martin was in the library.

Dorrien never thought of bidding him good-bye.

He felt that he was going out to his death.

His lips were dry, and his eyes burning. The butler helped him on with his coat.

Cora stood by, watching.

'Am I to tell Mr. Metherell,' she said, following him on to the steps, 'that you have walked on?'

'Thank you,' he managed to say. 'Good-bye.'

She waved her hand to him.

It was not dark yet, except beneath the trees, but that bewildering in between-the-lights, when all things are indistinct.

Directly he had gone, Cora ran upstairs to a window where she would be able to see him going towards the plantation.

A high yew hedge hid him for some little distance, and it seemed to her an extraordinarily long time before he emerged beyond it.

In fact, she was on the point of thinking that, after all, he had played her false, when she caught sight of his light coat moving quickly in the direction of the plantation.

She clasped her hands together with horrible gle.

'Revenge!—revenge!' she cried, exultantly. 'Will he think of me when that long, sharp knife is driven into him? Ah, but I hope it will hurt—torture! Duvet, do not kill too quickly. Stab again, and again, and again!'

The light coat had disappeared in the twilight.

She leant from the window, and listened intently.

A peaceful silence brooded everywhere, till, from far away, something like a faint, indistinct cry reached her straining ears.

Only once; there was no sound after that.

She drew her head in, and gently closed the window.

They will find his body,' she said. 'I wonder whom they will suspect? Not me, for example; and Duvet will be far away before the morning dawn.'

She went singing down the wide staircase.

The butler came to her.

'The carriage is at the door, miss; but Mr. Metherell has not yet come in.'

'How very odd!' Cora exclaimed. 'He went away with Monsieur West. I have not seen him since.'

He ordered his portmanteau to be packed, and the carriage to be here in good time. Do you think, miss, it is likely he will have gone on to the station, expecting the captain to meet him there?'

Perhaps. Tell Ratcliff to wait a few moments longer, and then drive to the station. He will overtake Captain Dorrien.'

Ratcliff the coachman, waited another five minutes, then drove off with a couple of neat brown portmanteaus in the basket-tray and no one inside the carriage.

In about an hour's time he returned.

The portmanteaus were still there, and the carriage still empty.

He had not overtaken Captain Dorrien on the road, neither had Captain Dorrien or Mr. Gilbert Metherell appeared at the station.

He had waited until the train had gone, then had returned.

'How very odd!' Cora said, again; adding: 'They have evidently changed their minds, and have decided to spend the evening elsewhere.'

Gilbert, she expected, would come home drunk, in the small hours of the morning, and Dorrien would lie stiff and stark where he had fallen, until someone in horror and surprise should find him.

But Gilbert did not come reeling home in the small hours of the morning, nor did he put in an appearance during the next day.

No one felt any anxiety about his absence.

He had often stayed away for a couple of days at a time.

Sir Martin imagined he had gone away in a rage, after his encounter with Vivian West, and would come back when he had cooled down.

He and Dorrien were, of course, together.

It was a queer way to behave.

Had Sir Martin's mind been less occupied with sad and terrible thoughts, he might have bestowed more attention on the missing men.

But a week had almost gone before he awoke to the fact that the matter was beginning to look serious.

No one in or near the neighbourhood had seen anything of either of them.

A wire was despatched to Dorrien's

town quarters; but he had not been there for some weeks.

Then Sir Martin telegraphed to every possible place, but without result.

It seemed as if the two men had disappeared from the face of the earth.

For miles round everyone was talking of it.

Advertisements appeared in all the papers, begging them to let their whereabouts be known at once.

But no answer came.

Then once again detectives came down to Metherell Court.

And people began to whisper that a curse rested upon the house.

CHAPTER XXV.

At Royal Heath, as elsewhere, little was talked of but the strange disappearance of Gilbert Metherell and Captain Dorrien.

'It's a rum go, and no mistake,' Sir Henry said.

He had just returned from Metherell Court with the intelligence that there was still no news of the missing men.

Lady Ayerst, with most of her guests, was sitting under the trees on the lawn.

The sunlight struck bright gleams in the silver and china of the tea table, over which she was presiding.

Sir Henry sank into a vacant chair.

It was a hot day, and he had been riding. 'And they have absolutely found no clue?' one of the ladies questioned.

'Not the remotest clue,' Ayerst answered, and helping himself to some strawberries and cream. 'Metherell has two detectives down. They are having the river dragged—commensurate areas! It is likely that either of those two committed suicide?'

'They might have met with an accident,' Madge remarked.

Sir Henry laughed scornfully.

'Is it likely that Dorrien, on his way to the station, would turn off in the opposite direction, and take a swim in his clothes instead? Of course what those fellows believe is, that Dorrien met Metherell on his way to the station; that they fooled about until too late to catch the train, got drunk, and, coming home, fell into the river. The only argument against this is, that not a single soul in the whole neighbourhood saw either of them that evening. As the case stands now, Gilbert Metherell disappeared at seven, and Dorrien at half-past eight.'

'It is incomprehensible,' Madge said.

'One disappearance may have nothing to do with the other,' a tall, dark man—Colonel Harvey, by name—observed.

'I should say it has,' Sir Henry argued. 'My belief is, they will turn up, safe and sound, in a day or two's time, and I think this detective business all nonsense. According to Sir Martin, the little Rozier girl, and the servants, the fellows were going up to town on the spree. I suppose Gilbert is having a final kick-up before he settles down.'

'But they took no clothes!' cried one.

'They would surely have answered the advertisements,' said another.

'It is nine days since they disappeared,' remarked a third; while a fourth—it was Vivian West—said—

'I agree with you, Ayerst. I should say they are doing it for a joke.'

'By-the-by, West,' Sir Henry exclaimed. 'I expect we shall have one of these detective chaps round here soon. It seems that you were really the last person to see Gilbert Metherell. Shouldn't be surprised if they wanted to make out that you had something to do with it.'

Vivian looked up in annoyance.

'I can tell them nothing,' he said.

He had no wish to be questioned about his interview with Gilbert.

So far, he had kept it quiet, and Shirley's name, and the indignity to which she had been subjected, had not been gossiped over by everyone in the place.

It was known that he had walked and talked with Gilbert Metherell of the evening of his strange disappearance; but Sir Martin was the only person who was aware that there had been a quarrel.

The chief detective, a small spare man, with a shrewd kindly face questioned Cora closely.

She gave all the information required of her in a perfectly simple, straightforward manner.

She had come home that afternoon, not feeling very well. She met Captain Dorrien then for the first time. He was a great friend of Monsieur Metherell's. They all three went into the garden. Monsieur Metherell then said, had he known she was going to return that day, he would not have arranged to go to town. There was some talk of putting off the visit. Captain Dor-

rien was very agreeable, and seemed only anxious to do as Monsieur Metherell desired.

While they were conversing, a gentleman Monsieur Vivian West, called. He said he had come to see Monsieur Metherell. He had something of importance to say. He refused to speak it before her, Cora, and finally, she walked away with Captain Dorrien.

Afterwards Monsieur Metherell and Monsieur West walked in the other direction. It was towards the plantation. Neither of them came back. Monsieur Metherell was never seen again.

At half-past eight Captain Dorrien said he would walk on to the station, it was such a lovely evening. The carriage waited for Monsieur Metherell, but he never came.

Cora drew a long sigh.

'That is all Monsieur,' she concluded. Mr. Hatchette, the detective, had listened intently to all she had said.

'This Mr. West,' he observed. 'What sort of a gentleman is he?'

'Young, handsome, an artist,' Cora glibly replied.

'And a great friend of Mr. Metherell's?'

Cora pursed her red lips together.

'Friend, you say? I should say they hated one another.'

'Indeed, and why?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'How can I tell?'

'You probably have some idea, miss,' the man respectfully suggested. 'Was there a lady in the case?'

'On no; nothing of that, though it is true that Monsieur West is about to marry Miss Lorraine, who was at one time affianced to Monsieur Metherell.'

Mr. Hatchette stroked his shaven chin.

'I must thank you very much, miss,' he said, 'for so kindly answering my questions. It is a strange business and we have absolutely no clue to work on. It would be as well for me to interview Mr. West. Does he reside near here?'

'He is at present staying with Sir Henry and Lady Ayerst, at Royal Heath, a pleasant drive from here,' Cora answered, pleasantly. 'If there is anything I can do to help in this search, I shall be glad to do it. It is so hard to wait and wait, and to be able to do nothing.'

'I trust you will not have to wait much longer. We shall do all in our power to end your suspense.'

And the little man bowed himself out.

It was about half past five that afternoon that he presented himself at Royal Heath, and told in his card to Vivian West.

'I sent you the fellows would be down upon you,' Sir Henry cried. 'Hatchette, that's the man. Don't look so scared, Shirley; they won't arrest him to-day.'

'I didn't know that I was looking scared,' Shirley returned, scornfully; and I certainly don't feel so.'

Sir Henry laughed teasingly.

It always pleased him to make her angry.

'Be careful what you say,' he called after Vivian, 'or you'll be locked up before you know where you are.'

The young fellow looked back, smiling. He was rolling a cigarette as he went.

Mr. Hatchette was standing in the hall. West took him into the morning room.

'Now,' he said, pleasantly, 'what is it you want?'

Mr. Hatchette stroked his chin—a habit of his.

'I am given to understand, sir,' he said, 'that you were with Mr. Metherell on the evening he disappeared.'

'Yes, I was with him.'

'You have some communication to make to him, of a private nature?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think that communication had anything to do with his disappearance?'

'I don't see how it could possibly have anything to do with it,' Vivian replied.

He was sitting on the edge of the table, his cigarette between his fingers.

Mr. Hatchette, who had declined a chair stood by the window facing him.

'May I ask you to give me some idea of what it was about?'

Vivian hesitated for an instant, then said—

'I do not see my way to doing that. Besides, it would help you in nowise. It would not afford you the slightest clue.'

'Pray don't think me impertinent for asking; but you see, Mr. West, we are at present completely in the dark. On the same evening, at different hours, two people vanish—there is no trace left of them!'

'I think you will find that in time they will turn up all right.'

'They may—they may; but I doubt it, Mr. West. It don't look that way to me. Was Captain Dorrien a friend of yours?'

'I saw him once. It was the evening he was going up to town. I have never spoken to him.'

'And you feel that it is quite impossible for you to give us any information that may help us.'

'Quite. I know very little of young Metherell.'

'You went to Metherell Court purposely to see him.'

Vivian stood up.

'You know all that I can tell you,' he said, quietly; 'or rather, all that I intend to tell you. I could say anything that would assist you I would do so, however unpleasant to myself. I saw Mr. Metherell on the evening of the seventeenth. What I had to say to him concerns no one. He walked with me to the plantation; I left him there; I have never seen him since.'

He opened the door for Mr. Hatchette.

'And you parted on friendly terms?'

That gentleman said, as he passed through. 'I think,' Vivian said, 'that you have come down here to discover the whereabouts of Mr. Metherell and Captain Dorrien, not to pry into my affairs. Good-afternoon.'

And Mr. Hatchette found himself handed from footman to footman until he was outside the great oak doors.

He returned home, wrapped in such profound thought that he drove past the gates

of Metherell Court, and only found his mistake when he reached the foot of the hill.

Sir Martin met him as he came from the stable-yard.

'Have you made any progress yet?' he asked.

'I am sorry to say, Sir Martin, we have not,' Hatchette replied. 'But give us time. Problems like these are not solved in a few hours. I have just been over to see Mr. West, trusting that he could help us, as I have ascertained that he was the last person in whose company your son was seen.'

'Ah, yes; I met him in the plantation.'

'Alone?'

'Yes; he had just parted from my son.'

'He told you so?'

'Yes.'

'You did not actually see Mr. Metherell?'

'No, I did not see him. I heard his voice. But what has this to do with it?'

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

'At present we hold no clue,' he explained. 'I seek every scrap of information that may lead to one. You say you heard your son's voice. Can you recollect what he said?'

Sir Martin thought for a few moments before answering; then he said—

'My son and Mr. West had had some slight dispute. Mr. West struck him two or three times. I heard my son call for help.'

p>'You did not go to him?'

'I met young West, who told me what had occurred, and expressed his regret for having acted in the way he had. I tell you this because my first impression was that my son was keeping away in a fit of ill-temper. I still think that this may be the cause.'

'It so, he has managed to efface himself very cleverly. I should like to take a walk through this plantation. Is it in this direction?'

'I will take you there now,' Sir Martin said. 'We turn to the left here.'

The sun was shining brightly, the air was heavy with the perfume of flowers and drowsy with the hum of bees.

Two gardeners were mowing one of the tennis lawns.

The whirr of