

Continued from Tenth Page.  
 'What do you think of doing?'  
 Vivian thought for a moment, then answered as if he had decided once and for all—

'As the letter suggests. There is nothing else left to do.'

'You will break her heart.'

'Do hearts break?' with a cynical smile.

'No,' Sir Martin said, in a low voice.

'It would be more merciful if they did.'

Vivian knew that Sir Martin's life of late had been full of trouble; but there were times when he had dimly felt that the lines about his lips and eyes had been graven by a greater sorrow than any the world knew of.

He felt so now, and his heart went out in sympathy to the man who was even more lonely than himself.

'You too, have suffered,' he said, impulsively.

'Heaven alone knows how terrible,' Sir Martin said, under his breath. 'But my suffering has been the cost of a sin.'

Another instant, perchance and the story of his life—his weakness and his wickedness—would have been begun to Vivian West; but, as the words were rising to his lips, Shirley Lorraine appeared on the terrace.

Her cheeks had the color of a wild rose, her eyes looked blue as that glimpse of sea out beyond the trees.

'How solemn you both look!' she cried as they turned to meet her. 'How can you be anything but happy on a morning like this? Has anything happened?'

This last was added wistfully. Such awful things had occurred during the past two months, that her heart had contracted a habit of shivering at the merest shadow. She glanced from one to the other quickly.

'What is it?' she said.

'Nothing very terrible,' Sir Martin answered reassuringly. 'Madge has written to Vivian. You and he had better talk it over.'

'There is nothing to talk over,' she declared. 'Vivian knows that I will not listen.'

'You intend to stand by him, then, through thick and thin. Have you counted the cost, my child?'

Shirley laughed joyously.

'Have I not counted the cost?' she exclaimed. 'I am losing nothing, and gaining all.'

'You are a lucky fellow, Vivian,' Sir Martin said.

But the young fellow's face did not lighten.

'I know,' he said, gravely, 'that Shirley is willing to give up everything for me; but, the more I think of it, the more impossible it becomes for me to accept such a sacrifice. What can I give in return for all she would lose? My worldly goods depend on public favour. I cannot ask her to share poverty with me.'

'Sir Martin,' Shirley cried, is he not cruel to talk like this? As if I would care what I shared, so long as I shared with him.'

The baronet regarded her fondly.

'You are a brave, dear little girl,' he said, 'and I shall consider this boy a fool if he lets you slip through his fingers. As to poverty—well, Vivian, my lad, you need not fear that. I intend to leave you all I have. There is none other now who has a greater claim upon my affection. My days are fast drawing to a close. If you want to do a kindness to a sad and lonely man, bring your wife here, and live with me until I am called to face eternity.'

He was standing between them, a hand on a shoulder of each.

His voice was full of strong emotion. His words were so utterly unexpected by both his listeners, that, for an instant or so they remained perfectly silent.

Then Vivian West, greatly moved exclaimed—

'Your generosity and kindness are boundless. Had you been my father, you could not have shown me more. But this that you propose to do will—forgive my saying so—surely be robbing another?'

'When I am dead,' Sir Martin said, 'you will find that I have but acted justly.'

He left them then.

He could not trust himself to say more. It seemed to him that those clear, bright eyes of Vivian West's must read his secret—the secret he had been so near to telling but a few moments before.

As he went into the house, he felt thankful that he had not done so—that the impulse to confess, and endure the consequences, had passed away.

The trust and affection of this, his only son, were dearer to him than all else—the one drop of sweetness in his cup of bitterness, which he felt he had, indeed, drained to the bitter dregs.

During the late hours of the last few nights, he had employed himself in writing a full and detailed account of his marriage

with Lillian West, and the dastardly way in which he had treated her.

The task had been fraught with painful memories, which had awakened vain remorse and hopeless longing.

Often he had flung the pen upon the table and, springing up, had paced the room, his fingers clenching and unclenching, his face working pitifully.

It was awful recalling each occasion on which he had even fallen lower and lower—never rising, ever sinking.

His own self-contempt was limitless, and in that record of his life he did not spare himself.

When it was finished he sealed it, and addressing it to Vivian West, locked it away with other papers to be opened and read after his death.

Those papers and that document cleared the stain from Lillian West's life, and gave her son his birthright.

So far as it lay in his power, he had righted the wrong he had done.

In a little while it would all be well with those two whom he loved, and against whom he had sinned so deeply.

He had not the courage to tell them himself; but they would not have long to wait now.

He knew that his strength was fast failing him; and there were stores and treasures about his heart that warned him there was mischief there.

He made no attempt to stay the illness that was growing upon him, but felt glad and thankful as he marked the gradual decay.

His death would bring blessings; his life had given pain.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

Cora was fond of sitting behind the window curtains in her room and listening to any scraps of conversation going on on the terrace below, which her sharp ears could catch.

On the morning that Vivian West had shown Lady Ayerst's letter to Sir Martin, she had been there, straining every nerve to hear each word that was uttered.

Fortune favored her.

They came to a halt almost opposite her window; the breeze was blowing in from the sea, it carried their voices distinctly to her.

When Sir Martin entered the house, Vivian and Shirley walked to the end of the terrace, and down the broad white steps to the lawn.

Cora's ears were not acute enough to follow them.

She left her seat for another further back in the room.

'So,' she said, with an ugly little grin, 'that is your game, Sir Martin! That explains a great deal over which I have lately puzzled my brains. I have wondered greatly why I was not kicked out when there was so little to fear. I see it all now. He thinks to keep me quiet by letting me remain here. Very soon he will be dead; then he will not care for what I say, and all the money which should have been mine but for Duven's cursed mistake, will go to Monsieur Vivian West! Ah, will it? Make not too sure of that, my friend! It is I who want it—I who have worked, and plotted, and planned for it. It is I who intend to have it. Now let me think of how.'

She picked a piece of paper from off the floor, and began to fold and twist it, while her eyes were fixed on vacancy, and her scheming brain worked on and on.

At last she shot the scrap of paper she had rolled into a pellet across the room.

'It is all so difficult,' she cried, throwing out her hands. 'I know so little; if I saw much, I expose my ignorance, and then I lose the game. I must see him to-night. I must hint and threaten. He adores this Vivian West. He would not like him to hear the truth.'

She stood up, and, going to the dressing-table, began smoothing her glossy black hair in an abstract manner.

'There was that nurse,' she muttered, with drawn brows; 'she must have been his mother; but, ma foi! how close she was—never a word would she drop. I wish I could have wrung it from her.'

That night when the house was quiet, and Sir Martin sat alone, Cora suddenly appeared before him.

He had been sitting with his elbow on the arm of the chair, his chin in the hollow of his hand.

His thoughts were not unpleasant ones just then.

He was picturing Vivian West as master of Merrell Court.

He had fancied him sitting in the chair he now occupied, thinking, perchance, of the man who had sinned, and suffered, and passed away.

He sighed, and, lifting his eyes, found Cora standing but a few yards from him watching him keenly.

She had been so far from his thoughts of late, that he realized her presence with a painful start.

'You?' he exclaimed, hoarsely.

She smiled, and came a little nearer. The peaceful sadness of his mind fled. The horror of his life came back to him.

'What is it you want?' he asked.

'Some arrangement,' she answered, drawing forward a chair, and sitting down. 'I was to have married your son, and so have enjoyed your wealth. Your son is now dead. What arrangements do you intend to make? I still keep your secret. I still want my price.'

He made no immediate reply.

She rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and placidly waited for him to speak.

None seeing her expression of quiet indifference would have guessed at the tremor of uncertainty she was in.

At last Sir Martin spoke.

'I will give you one thousand pounds to-night,' he said, 'if you will leave this house and never darken its doors again.'

A thin stream of smoke issued from her lips.

She shook her head.

'No, thank you, monsieur.'

'I will give you two—nay three.'

'Oo thank you, monsieur.'

'You forget,' he said, impressively, 'that, I no longer fear you as I did. The harm that you can do me now is but small compared to what it was when my poor wife, and boy were living. The secret you then held would have ruined both their lives. Now you can hurt but me.'

'And one other.'

'He will learn all at my death.'

'He will hear it before unless you make it worth my while to be silent.'

'Rather than he should learn the story your lips, I will tell him myself. He is just and generous. He would pardon the father who has suffered so greatly for his sins. It would be the better and wiser thing to do. It would all be over then—I should have nothing more to fear. Oh, God! had I but the courage!'

He was talking to himself, in a rapid undertone.

Cora's quick ear caught the words.

'You would require a great deal of courage,' she declared, with a jeering laugh, 'to make a full confession to Vivian West. He is proud is he not? Ma foi! how he would hate you for making him what he is—a bastard! Is not that the pleasant name one would apply to him?'

The hot fire of a fierce indignation blazed in Sir Martin's eyes.

'You vile thing!' he cried, in a voice strangled with mad anger. 'Know, once for all, he is my son—my own dear son. His mother was my wife—when, through the foul temptation of Dola Kozski, I deceived and betrayed. I have nothing to fear from you—nothing—you can go.'

He stood up, and pointed towards the door.

She did not move.

The cigarette dropped from her fingers. She swept it from her lap to the tender.

The ground was slipping away from under her feet; but, outwardly, she showed no sign of fear.

'Dola Kozski,' she said, slowly, her gleaming eyes fixed on his face—'Dola Kozski, who was murdered here.'

That blaze of righteous anger died away, the outstretched hand fell to his side the tall form, which had been proudly drawn to its full height, grew bent and feeble again.

He sank back upon the chair.

The shot had told, though she knew not why.

She watched him while he endeavored to recover himself.

He was a long while before he spoke; then, at length, he said, in a low weary voice—

'Your price?'

'All that you have,' she answered, 'left to me, unconditionally.'

'It is impossible.'

'Had I married Gilbert, it would have been mine.'

'He escaped that fate. His death has altered everything.'

'But I will not have it so. I have told you my terms. You dare not refuse them.'

'I dare, and I do.'

She pushed her chair back, and rose, with a short mocking laugh.

'Then you leave me to do my worst?'

'No, mademoiselle, I intend to take it out of your power to harm me or mine. All that there is to tell, I myself will tell. I would rather face any evil than rob my son for you.'

He had lifted his head again.

All that was best in him had risen against this temptation.

He felt it was, indeed, the final trial that if he gave way now, all would be lost; Vivian's inheritance stolen to bury his own sin—the tardy reparation he was about to make ruined.

While he strove for strength, he was terribly conscious of his own fatal weakness.

He had meant to do right often before—he had struggled ere this, but always it had ended in utter failure.

He remembered this, with a sinking heart, as he faced Cora Kozier.

She realized, as she listened to him, that her power over him had, indeed, vanished away—it was a thing of the past.

Kate had made her weapons useless.

She could have cried with the sense of bitter mortification which swept over her.

But she felt that this was no time for tears if she wished to gain anything from the man who was casting off her yoke.

'You are not counting the cost of your words,' she said, while her quick brain schemed and planned.

'You are mistaken mademoiselle, I have done so.'

'And you are determined that, unless I

accept your terms, you will brand yourself, before all the world, as a—blackguard?'

'I am determined.'

He thought of the son he loved more than his life, and it kept him strong.

He met her gaze unflinchingly.

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'You are mad!' she exclaimed. 'You will repent this. I must have time to consider. In one week I will give you my answer.'

'I must have it now. I must know, either one way or the other, before you leave this room tonight.'

She lifted her eyebrows.

'Monsieur is impatient. The question is a great one. I cannot answer all in a hurry.'

'Revenge will avail you nothing.'

'But what you offer is so small a sum.'

'It is far more than you deserve.'

Her eyes flashed; then she lowered them.

'I am alone in the world, monsieur; my wits stand between me and starvation. Had my poor mother lived—'

She made an expressive gesture.

'For that reason,' he said, breaking a short silence, 'I will give you five thousand. I can do no more.'

'And if I accept this I must leave the house instantly—this very hour?'

'As soon as you can make other arrangements. Shall we say the day after to-morrow?'

'As you will. And the money; when am I to receive it?'

'When you are ready to go.'

'Monsieur is very careful,' she said, walking to the door.

She hesitated a moment before opening it; then, as if suddenly making up her mind, did so, and passed out.

'I have two days,' she said to herself, when she had gained her own room. 'Let me see how I can best employ them.'

She went to sleep, that night, smiling to herself.

A plot had unfolded itself to her, which pleased her mightily.

The next morning, while Sir Martin interviewed his bailiff, Vivian West, with a pipe between his lips, strolled idly through the gardens.

Since his imprisonment he had never once laid brush to canvas.

A curious lethargy seemed to have fallen upon his once ambitious and energetic spirit.

This dullness and indifference to a talent which had been a passion with him, had made him vaguely uneasy, and of late there had crept upon him the fear that, as the all-absorbing love for his art had left him, so might the cunning have forsaken his fingers.

He was afraid to try his hand, and daily put off the taking up of his old work, saying always to himself—

'To-morrow—to-morrow!'

As he walked slowly between banks of star-like dahlias, he said to himself—

'This idleness must end. I will begin to-morrow.'

The path along which he was wandering, led to an old moat.

The water was covered with green reed; tall rushes grew around the bank.

An old sundial stood by a quaint-cut yew hedge, and near it a seat, on which sat a slim, graceful figure in black.

The sombre attire and drooping attitude seemed fitted for that shady unkempt spot.

The whole made a picture which pleased Vivian's somewhat morbid taste.

He stood still, to admire the effect of light and shade.

Then the figure on the bench moved, looked up, and, slowly rising, came towards him.

He saw, then, that it was Cora Kozier, and lifted his hat in recognition.

'Ah, Monsieur West!' she said, with a mournful smile. 'You startled me. I imagined myself alone.'

'I am sorry to have disturbed you,' he replied, noticing that her long black lashes were wet. 'I followed this path; it has brought me to you, and now it shall take me back.'

He glanced to where the dahlias were nodding in the sunlight—one blaze of brilliant color—scarlet, crimson, and gold.

'Come into the sunshine,' he suggested, kindly. 'This is a damp, dreary place. One expects to see a ghost of the past come from beneath those trees.'

'The sun is for you, monsieur—the shade for me.'

'We all get our glimpses of the one, and I suppose, we are all apt to think, more than our share of the other.'

'Ah! do you think that?' she asked, wistfully. 'Perhaps it is so; but it is hard to believe. Sometimes it all seems so very dark.'

She spoke in a jerky way, which made West think she was struggling with an inclination to sob.

The fact was she was out of breath.

From her window, where she had been watching for him she had seen Vivian walking in the direction of the moat, and, quick as thought, had left the house, and, taking another route, reached the old seat by the sundial but a few seconds before he came upon her, sitting there so still and, apparently, dejected, and unconscious of his presence.

'I hope it is not dark for you now, mademoiselle,' he said, gravely. 'I know you have experienced a great sorrow; but you must not give way to it.'

She drew out her handkerchief, holding it to her eyes.

'I am so alone—so desolate. Do not stay, monsieur; my sorrow can but weary you. None of you like me; you do not understand me. I am alone, in a strange country.'

'Not alone; you have friends, he said, cheerfully.

He felt very sorry for her; he felt, too, that he had been selfish never to have thought of her and her trouble.

He had been living in the same house with her for many weeks, yet had never shown her any attention or kindness.

It was true that she was rarely seen; but there had been opportunities, and he had let them go by.

She looked such a small, helpless little creature, and so woe-begone, as she lifted her face to his.

'Friends, monsieur—where are they?'

'Let me begin with, perhaps, your best and truest—Sir Martin West—'

She stopped him with an impatient gesture.

'My friend! Sir Martin my friend! Monsieur West, you know nothing of the truth. He hates me. Tomorrow I am to go away. He cares not where, or what becomes of me. He is giving me money to go. You think I am mad to talk like this—it is not so?'

'I think,' he said, gently, 'that you have moped away by yourself, and brooded over things until you see them all distorted and so find slight and coldness where none are intended. You must come amongst us more.'

'Tomorrow I go away.'

'But you will be coming here again?'

'Never again,' she declared. 'Had my lover lived, this would have been my home.'

'Poor girl!' he said, compassionately. 'I am, indeed, sorry for you.'

She took his hand and kissed it.

'Monsieur, you are good to me. I shall never forget it.'

'I wish I had been good to you,' he answered, regretfully. 'I am a selfish thoughtless fellow, mademoiselle; but if, in future, you need the help of a friend, will you write to me?'

p&gt;'One million thanks. I feel not so lonely now. How can I show you my gratitude?'

He laughed in his pleasant easy fashion.

'Wait until I merit it.'

'A kind word in the hour of need,' she said, softly. 'Let me keep you no longer, monsieur. Let me bid you adieu.'

'Will you not walk back with me?'

'No; I will stay here a little while longer. I have much to think of. Farewell!'

'I shall see you again, mademoiselle.'

'Perhaps.'

He turned to leave her then, but had gone but a few yards from her, when she ran after him.

'Monsieur, I talk of gratitude, and I let you go like this! I—I know a secret concerning you. I dare not breathe it now—I am afraid. But what I know is true. Sometimes I have thought of telling you. Then I have said, it is not my business. But now—now I feel that I must tell you.'

She was clinging to his hands, excitedly, her words coming