

Continued from Tenth Page.

er, and he saw what it was—a leafy lane, with the sea beyond, the sunlight struggling through the trees, and in the corner, a name, written in brown paint—Vivian West.

‘What do you think of it?’ Shirley asked, as proudly as if she had done it herself.

But Sir Martin made no reply. She looked at him in surprise. His face had grown an ashen hue. The picture had slipped from his fingers as if he had not the power to hold it.

‘You are a taint—ill!’ the artist exclaimed, in concern. He put out his arms to support the tottering figure; but the baronet, shrinking from him sank upon a chair. ‘I shall be well directly,’ he gasped. ‘A spasm—my heart.’

The artist poured out some spirit; but Sir Martin’s hand shook so that he could scarcely raise the glass to his lips. Shirley steadied it for him.

She was frightened.

She had never before seen him like this. He tried to smile at her distressed face. The blood began to come back to his lips and cheeks, and after a few moments, he managed to stand up.

‘I have been subject to these attacks lately,’ he said, striving to treat the matter lightly.

‘No doubt the heat has something to do with it—that and old age. I do not think I will wait to see her ladyship this afternoon.’

The artist tried to persuade him to stay a while longer and rest; Shirley begged him to do so, but he courteously, though steadily, refused.

He would go home and doctor himself, he said.

He was seated on his horse, when he turned to the artist, who was standing bare-headed, at the gate.

‘I do not yet know your name.’

The young man looked up with a pleasant smile.

‘It is Vivian West,’ he said. ‘Good afternoon.’

‘Vivian West!’ thought Shirley, as she sped over the even roads to Fairfield. ‘Could any name have suited him better?’

The same name throbbed in Sir Martin’s ears, as he rode back to Metherell Court.

Vivian West!—her child—his son! Had the boy any notion of who he was? Had he come there to force him to acknowledge him?

Then the remembrance of the frank, quiet gaze, dispelled the fear.

But what strange irony of Fate had brought him almost to his very gates?

He felt that powers beyond his feeble strength were gathering together to crush him—that his sins were finding him out.

For years he had kept his skeleton locked in sight; but now it was thrusting out its bony hands, and forcing wide the door.

As he passed slowly up the avenue, there came to him the recollection of that day, so long ago, when he had come to Metherell Court in answer to his uncle’s summons.

It had been the turning-point in his life. He saw himself as he was then—a young man in the flush of life and strength, with all before him.

He was nigh the end of all things now, burdened with guilt and misery, his soul black with sin, his hands stained with blood.

There was no place for him on earth—no place for him in Heaven.

He went into his study, and, bowing his head upon his arms, wept for the first time since he had been a little child, while Vivian West, all unconscious of the tragedy which he played a part, walked alone on the quiet seashore, dreaming his dreams to the music of the waves, and drinking in, with a delight only an artist can feel, the beauty of the summer’s evening.

The sun had set in a cloudy mist lying low in the west; but the rosy tints had not yet faded from the sky and the wide waste of water reflecting the glow.

Some fishing-smacks were heading for the open sea.

The men’s voices, and the creaking of ropes, came distinctly to his ears.

Now and again Vivian paused to pick a pebble from the sand, and fling it across the shining water, or turned to look the way he had come, whistling softly to himself the while.

He was very contented that evening, though, had he been asked, he could not have told why he was so.

Success seemed as far away as ever, his pockets were empty as of old, and all the little worries and crosses of his life were still there.

Yet it was as if a veil had been drawn

across them, hiding, for the time, their ugliness.

After a while he left the beach for the path which ran along the edge of the marshes.

He would take a look at the gate which had suggested the picture he intended to call ‘Memories.’

A few yards brought him in sight of it. A girl was leaning upon it, in just the same attitude he had fancied for his picture. Her head was turned away.

There was a grace and ease about the figure which pleased him.

He drew out his book and sketched it. As he rapidly finished the drawing, she turned and came towards him.

It was Shirley Lorraine.

Perhaps he had already known it, for he did not seem surprised, merely slipping the book into his pocket and lifting his cap as she wished him good evening.

‘It was such a lovely evening, that I came further than I intended,’ she said. ‘I was resting.’

‘It is rather a lonely walk for you to choose,’ he replied. ‘I should have thought the esplanade would have suited you better.’

‘Why? Do you think I am one of those who only care to look at people and shops?’

‘I do not know you well enough to venture an opinion about your tastes,’ he said, coolly.

‘He is hateful,’ Shirley thought. ‘Any other man would have made some pleasant reply.’

She wondered why he disliked her so, and then, on the impulse of the moment, she lifted her eyes to his, and asked him why it was?

He looked taken aback at first—he had not thought of her putting such a question; then he said—

‘You are mistaken. I do not know what has made you imagine such a thing.’

‘Your manner,’ she explained, growing very red. ‘You make me feel always that you do not like me.’

‘I apologize if I have behaved rudely in any way. I am not used to ladies’ society. She thought of the portrait on his mantelpiece, and, stooping, plucked a little yellow flower, and pulled it to pieces.

Words seemed to have forsaken her—she could think of nothing to say.

The silence became awful.

Then she took a step from him.

‘I must be going home now, so, good evening.’

‘It is growing dark. May I walk with you part of the way, if you are nervous?’

‘Thanks, no; I will not trouble you.’

‘It would be no trouble, since I am going in the same direction.’

She gave a little vexed laugh.

‘Otherwise, you would not have offered?’

‘It is impossible to say,’ he gravely returned.

Again she lifted her eyes to his.

‘I have never met with anyone like you before,’ she said.

‘That is very probable,’ he assented.

‘Do you pride yourself on being disagreeable, or are you so only to me?’

‘You know the old story of the fox and the grapes?’ he said, quietly.

‘Oh, yes!’ she cried; ‘and I always had the greatest contempt for that fox.’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘If a thing is out of your reach, is it not better to persuade yourself that you do not really want it—that it is not worth the having?’

She shook her head.

‘It is better to make up your mind to have it.’

He laughed a little bitterly.

‘Your lines have been cast in pleasant places,’ he said. ‘You have not learnt the meaning of the word Defeat.’

‘Have you?’

‘I have learnt there are some things I can never win, and some things I had better not try to win. Your friendship is one.’

‘But why?’

They were walking along, side by side, over the short coarse grass.

The stars were beginning to glimmer in the sky.

‘Why?’ he repeated. ‘It is easily explained. Your world and mine are wide apart. It would be madness to attempt to stretch across. You are surrounded with friends; I have none. You have been reared in luxury and refinement; I have fought my way inch by inch. The only one who was good to me and who took an interest in me, is dead.’

‘And your parents?’ she said, softly.

‘They, too, are dead. I do not remember them. I do not even possess a single thing to remind me of them. I am about the most lonely mortal on the face of the earth.’

She stretched out her hand to him.

‘If that is really so,’ she said, ‘will you not forget all that nonsense about being so far apart, and let me be your friend? If I might watch you paint, and talk to you sometimes, I should be so pleased.’

‘You will soon grow tired of it,’ he said, half sadly.

She gave a happy little laugh.

‘We shall see,’ she said.

Afterwards, when their lives and their hopes seemed blighted forever, they often recalled that evening when, for the first time, they walked together, each gathering a strange new thrilling gladness from the other’s society.

To the girl it seemed like a sweet dream, in which the past and the future appeared of no account.

The starlit sky, the ceaseless murmur of the restless ocean, the scented air, all seemed to add to the enchantment of that hour.

Alas! how soon it was over!

They stood for a minute or so by the garden gate of Fairfield.

Silent bats were skimming through the air, the tall white lilies gave forth their fragrant perfume, the lights of the house gleamed through curtained windows and the strains of music came to them.

‘Madge was singing; sweet and clear, her voice rose and fell.’

They waited until the end of the song, then their hands met, and they parted.

‘Good-night!’—‘Good-night!’

It was all they said.

A look into each other’s eyes, and she had passed through the white gate and he was walking down the road.

Shirley was naturally open and frank about all things; but, somehow, that evening she could not bring herself to speak of her meeting with Vivian West.

She shrank from the questions and remarks which would follow the announcement.

Fortunately, her mother was so full of some news which had arrived by the evening’s post that she quite forgot to ask her daughter where she had been.

‘Oh, Shirley,’ she exclaimed, as the girl, having removed her hat, came into the drawing room, ‘who do you think is engaged? An enemy of yours, and to such a nice fellow, too. He was so agreeable at Gilbert’s coming-of-age-ball—took me down to supper, and was so attentive. I am sure that, but for him I should have been left to starve.’

Madge was unconcernedly turning some music over.

Lucy was reading; but, as Shirley glanced at her, she noticed that the book was upside down, and that the hand which held it was trembling.

In an instant she knew who it was; but before she could utter his name, Mrs. Lorraine had done so.

‘You remember him, of course—Mr. Ridley. I always liked him so much, and quite thought him one of Lucy’s adorers. And to think he should admire that plain girl—Miss Ware!’

‘Eva Ware!’ Shirley exclaimed, in tones of disgust and surprise. ‘You don’t mean it—who told you?’

‘She has written. The letter was meant for you, but, being addressed to Miss Lorraine, and not to Miss Shirley Lorraine, Madge naturally opened it. Here it is.’

Shirley seized the pink envelope, and hastily withdrew its contents.

‘My Dear Shirley,’—the letter began—‘Just a line to tell you that I am engaged to Harold Ridley. His people are coming to Coddington for a change, and I am to stay with them, so we shall meet again. Of course it is not a very brilliant match, but his people are well off, and he has expectations.’

‘I hear you and Bertie Metherell have really made up your minds at last, and so send you my congratulations. Am having an awfully gay time here. Am going to a big ball tonight—wishing you could see my gown, it’s simply ravishing.’

‘Yours very sincerely,’

‘Eva Ware.’

‘Little beast!’ Shirley cried, crushing the letter into a ball. ‘I wonder how she got hold of him. He isn’t in love with her, that is very certain.’

Madge ran her fingers over the piano keys.

‘He is not marrying her for money, so I suppose it must be for love,’ she said.

‘Do you think,’ Shirley cried, indignantly, ‘that he could care for her? She is mean, selfish, ugly—’

‘My dear child,’ Mrs. Lorraine laughed, ‘do not be so uncharitable. I thought her decidedly stylish, though I did not particularly like her; but, evidently, she has found someone to appreciate her.’

‘Nonsense!’ the ‘dear child’ returned. ‘Come into the garden, Lucy, and let me abuse her to my heart’s content.’

But, once in the garden, neither spoke for some time; then, at last, Shirley said—

‘Well, what do you think of it?’

Lucy gave a little cough, as if she found it rather difficult to get her voice.

‘He has pleased himself, I suppose,’ she observed.

‘You won’t care, will you?’

‘I am not going to break my heart for him.’

‘He is not worth it. He is a flirt, and I am very glad he has been caught.’

‘It is rather galling, though,’ Lucy said, to find he prefers Eva Ware, with nothing to Lucy Brend, with much.’

‘I don’t believe he does prefer her,’ Shirley protested. ‘I always feel certain that he cared for you at one time. Perhaps there is some dreadful misunderstanding—’

‘What misunderstanding could there be?’ the other interrupted. ‘Do not let us talk of him any more. I want to forget I was ever fool enough to care for a man who never gave me a serious thought. I tingle all over when I think of it. I would rather marry Captain Dorrien, than that Harold Ridley should know the truth.’

‘He never can know it,’ Shirley said, ‘unless you or I tell him. But, Lucy, when are you going to tell Captain Dorrien that you have changed your mind?’

Lucy paused to sniff at a drooping pink rose.

‘I have done so,’ she said. ‘I wrote this afternoon, while you were out. I felt I could keep it up no longer. I sent him back his presents. You can’t think what a relief it is. Though, had Eva’s letter come earlier, I don’t suppose I should have written.’

‘I am very glad you have,’ Shirley returned. ‘For, next to Eva Ware, I dislike Captain Dorrien. They would have made a very nice couple.’

‘I only wish I had never met any of them,’ Lucy said, wearily. ‘They have spoilt this summer for me.’

‘There are heaps more for you to look forward to,’ Shirley remarked, hopefully. ‘Perhaps, next summer you will meet the real, right man.’

‘Perhaps!’ Lucy echoed.

But in her heart she knew, that never again could she care for any man as she had cared for Harold Ridley.

‘Sir Martin,’ she said, with a slightly foreign accent, ‘I wish to see him.’

‘Sir Martin is engaged, miss,’ the butler promptly replied.

‘If that is the case, I will await his leisure,’ she said, stepping into the hall.

‘You cannot see him to night,’ the man assured her. ‘Sir Martin is at home to no one.’

She was perfectly self-possessed, and quietly determined to have her own way. ‘My business with him is of great importance.’

‘If you will call in the morning, miss, no doubt you will be able to see Sir Martin,’ the butler informed her.

‘I will see him now,’ she replied. ‘Then—take this, and tell your master I have travelled a long distance to speak with him.’

The butler handed the card she had given him to another flunkey, and carried it off.

Sir Martin was sitting alone in his study, working out a scheme for pushing Vivian West on in the world.

Now that he had found his son, he meant to do all that he possibly could for him.

He would make all the reparation that lay in his power for the wrong he had done.

He would begin to-morrow, and in the work find some relief from the grief that gnawed at his heart.

A tap at the door disturbed him.

He had given orders that he would see no one and called out, irritably—

‘Come in! What is it that you want?’

The footman entered, and solemnly presented the card.

‘The lady is in the hall, sir. She desires you to know that she has come a long distance.’

With a frown of displeasure Sir Martin picked up the slip of pasteboard.

As he read the name upon it, an exclamation of horror broke from his lips.

Madge Rozier, he bade the servant show the visitor into the morning-room.

Then he sat, with the card clenched in his fingers, staring before him.

A sense of hopeless despair, took possession of his soul.

After a while he lifted the card, and read again the neatly printed name upon it—

‘Mademoiselle Cora Rozier.’

Who was she?

Where had she come from, and why had she come?

He held his hands to his throbbing head. Was there never to be any peace for him—never any rest?

He rose, and, striving to appear calm and collected, crossed the hall to the morning-room, and opened the door.

It required all his nerve then, to keep outwardly composed, for, standing by the table facing him, was a girl the exact image of Dola Koneki—Dola as he had known her years ago; Dola as she was that night when she had come to tempt him.

The same flashing dark eyes, the same rich coloring, the same quick, impulsive manner.

‘When you saw my name,’ she began, without any preface, ‘you understood my business was urgent. You have advertised for the relatives of Madame Rozier. I come in answer. What does it mean?’

‘It means a very great deal,’ he said, gravely. ‘Will you not be seated?’

She sat on the arm of a chair, her dark eyes fixed on his face.

He could not meet them, but shaded his with his hand.

‘I should like, first of all, to know,’ he continued, ‘what Madame Rozier was to you?’

‘My mother.’

He started—that Dola might have had children had never entered his head.

‘You surprise me,’ he said. ‘Are you the only daughter?’

She nodded.

‘But where is ma petite mere?’ she asked. He knew not in what words he broke it to her.

She did not cry, but listened, dry eyed, to the ghastly story.

‘And that is all?’ she said, when he had finished. ‘You were never able to discover the assassin?’

‘We could find no clue.’

‘It was done here, in this house, and you say that someone must have been suspected.’

‘There was no one on whom we could throw the least suspicion,’ he replied.

All through, he had sat with his elbow resting on the table, and his hand shading his eyes.

His voice was very low, but quite distinct.

‘Ma foi—but it is incredible! Do you

think one person would stab another for no reason?’

‘We think robbery was intended.’

‘Bah!’ she cried. ‘If so, why did not they take something? They were not disturbed—you say nothing was known of it until late in the day.’

‘That is so. We had one of the first detectives in England to investigate the case. He could make nothing of it. It is all shrouded in mystery.’

‘And why?’ she questioned, excitedly. ‘Your detective had to judge from what he saw. He knew nothing of her life, nothing of the enemies she might have, who would profit by her death. Now I do know. I hold certain papers which may prove valuable clues. With their help I may be able to trace the guilty man. My mother took copies of them to England to show to a person whom they concerned; the real letters she left in a sealed packet with me. If I never return,’ she said, ‘you will be able to make use of these.’

‘Never return!’ I said; ‘why speak so?’ She laughed—you know her way, monsieur. ‘I am going into the lion’s mouth,’ she replied.

‘I hear no more of her—I wait—I grow anxious. Then, one day, I look in an English paper; it was some weeks old. I see your advertisement. I start at once. It was to this house my mother came.’

Desperation lent him courage.

For the first time he met her gaze.

‘You are mistaken, mademoiselle. She came to Coddington. We met by chance. I had a party of friends at the house. Madame Rozier was asked to join them. If I can help you in any way to trace your mother’s—murderer, I will do so.’

‘But—yes, you can help me, if you will allow me to remain here for a time.’

He had not thought of this.

For an instant he hesitated, then said—

‘I am afraid that is not possible. Lady Metherell has met with an accident, and is away from home at present.’

‘Must that prevent the granting of so slight a request?’ she asked. ‘The house is large—enormous. I beg for only one little room. I will not trouble you. You offer me help—this is not the help I ask.’

‘But in what way can it benefit you?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘I cannot tell yet. Monsieur surely agrees?’

He was fearful lest in his reluctance she should read some sign of guilt, and, stretching out his hand, pressed an electric button.

‘You shall have your wish,’ he said. ‘A suite of rooms shall be placed at your disposal at once.’

When the servant came in, he gave the necessary orders.

She did not thank him, but thoughtfully regarded him.

‘These papers,’ he said, breaking a silence which was becoming unendurable; ‘have you any idea of their contents?’

‘No, I was keeping them for my mother. I shall open them to-morrow. Or, rather, I think it will be wiser to place them in the hands of a solicitor.’

‘It would be the better plan,’ he said. But he felt as if an icy hand were clutching at his heart.

Another silence followed.

The dark eyes continued their watch.

It became unbearable, and, making some almost incoherent excuse about having business to attend to, he left her.

Till late into the night he sat huddled up in his chair, trying to face the danger which threatened him.

There seemed absolutely no loophole of escape from utter destruction.

Heaven alone knew what papers Cora Rozier might have in her possession; there was no telling what evidence there might be against him.

He saw himself tried and condemned; he pictured the dreary prison-cell, and the last hour of his life.

The disgrace and horror of it drained the blood from his face.

He would not live to meet such a doom. He leant forward, and, pulling open a drawer in a bureau, took out a revolver.

Better—far better—he thought, to end all, that night, than pass through the days which must follow.

Life was not so sweet that he need fear the losing of it.

He loaded the weapon, and placed it beside him.

It had come to this at last.

Hours passed, but he did not move; he was a natural coward, and shrank from this last action.

Still, it had to be done.

‘The wages of sin,’ he said, aloud, ‘is death.’

He laid his hand upon the revolver—had even lifted it to his head—when a new thought entered his distracted brain.

He would steal the papers!

If he failed, if the worst came to the worst, then he would slip into the room where he had spent so many unhappy hours, and end his wretched life.

While these thoughts went flashing through his mind, he removed his shoes, and noiselessly opening the door, crept out.

The great house lay in profound silence, in which every creak of the stairs sounded startlingly loud.

With bated breath, and starting eyes, he made his way to the apartment where Cora Rozier lay sleeping.

The grey light of early morn was peeping through the drawn blinds; things were visible but not distinct yet he dared not strike a light.

He stood for a few seconds listening to her quiet, regular breathing; then he knelt before an open trunk, and felt amongst the contents.

After some minutes of vain search, he lifted the tray, and cautiously lowered it to the ground. As he did so, something fell with a sharp sound, and rolled across the floor.

The girl sprang up in bed.

‘What is it?’ she cried. ‘Who is there?’

Martin Metherell crouched low.

An armchair stood between him and the bed.

To be Continued.

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