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toilet-table, then rested on the face of the woman standing by it.

'You are very proud,' she said. 'You think a great deal of yourself and your belongings; but I would not give that—with a significant snap of the fingers—to be standing in your shoes.'

For a moment Lady Metherell stared at her in blank amazement, then with a quick firm step, crossed the room, and laid her hand upon the bell.

'I advise you not to ring at once,' Cora said, calmly, swinging one foot backwards and forwards. 'Hear me first. I think you will find what I have to say—interesting. It concerns Sir Martin Metherell. When we first met, you imagined I knew something of his acquaintance with my mother. You pressed me to remain for that reason. It did not suit me to speak then, though it suits me now. Are you prepared to listen?'

Lady Metherell had grown as white as the curtains draping the windows.

She made a silent gesture of assent.

Cora smiled.

To have this cold haughty woman at her mercy was triumph indeed.

'It is not a pleasant tale,' she said. 'Perhaps your ladyship will not hold up her head quite so high when she heard it.'

A short time ago Sir Martin brought to this house a young man—Vivian West by name. You look surprised, you wonder what he has to do with my story. You are very dense, Lady Metherell, or you would have surely noticed the strange interest your husband took in this young man. When he was in the room he had no eyes for anyone else—when he spoke, he had no care for other voices. Do you know why? Because he was his own flesh and blood—his own son.'

Lady Metherell was standing rigidly upright, her hands clenched till the knuckles stood out like polished ivory.

'You lie!' she hissed. 'How dare you bring such a shameful falsehood to me!'

Cora shrugged her shoulders.

'It is a big pill to swallow,' she said. 'But it has to go down, for there is yet a stronger one to come. All these years Sir Martin has kept his secret. Only one other person knew it besides himself—that person was my mother. She came here for the purpose of seeing him. Doubtless she threatened to expose him. You know how she was silenced. He murdered her. Sir Martin has confessed to this. He shall repeat the confession before you. Perhaps, then, you will agree—as he has already done—to my terms.'

Cora watched the effect of her words.

She had expected a scene, and was rather taken aback by the stony calm with which Lady Metherell confronted her.

'Have you finished?'

'Unless you wish for a more detailed account of your husband's crimes.'

'I wish for nothing,' Lady Metherell replied, in that dead level voice, 'except to be alone. Will you kindly leave my room?'

Cora jumped up.

'Oh, with pleasure! I have no desire to stay. I will wait till one o'clock for your consent to my marriage with your son. If everything is not settled satisfactorily by that time, I shall have to tell him also the story.'

Lady Metherell neither moved nor spoke and the girl, with a jeering, taunting laugh, left her.

Outside the door she put her ear to the keyhole, but there was still no sound.

'Ma foi, she is made of iron!' she inwardly exclaimed. 'Dear, dear, am I not clever—I, who know so little, to have them all under my thumb?'

Ten minutes later, and Lady Metherell's maid was startled by the loud ringing of her mistress's bell.

She hastened to the room, to find her lying on the floor, insensible, the broken bell-rope in her hand.

The next instant, the house was echoing to the woman's frantic screams for help.

Lady Metherell was in a fit.

She was laid on her bed, and the doctor summoned, but it was beyond his power to restore consciousness.

'It looks as if she had received some great mental shock,' he said to Sir Martin. 'Do you know it such is the case? Mademoiselle Rozier saw her last, the maid tells me. May I see her?'

Sir Martin groped his way blindly to the bell, and rang it.

He knew all now.

He knew what Cora had done.

She came in, after a time, her eyes red as if she had been crying; she had taken

some trouble to make them look like that.

The doctor began at once.

'I understand you were the last who saw her ladyship before this seizure?'

Cora drew out her handkerchief.

'That is true I sat in her room—she was going out—she seemed quite well.'

'Did she seem happy? Did you notice anything unusual?'

'No; we were talking.'

'On ordinary topics?'

'We spoke of Monsieur West. I told her something I knew of him—an amusing little anecdote. We talked also of Sir Martin. Then I left her.'

'It is most extraordinary,' the doctor muttered. 'I cannot account for it. There is no doubt that Lady Metherell is in a most dangerous condition. I should like to have other advice.'

That afternoon, three doctors came and held a consultation over the still unconscious woman.

She might recover consciousness—she might live, they said; but in all probability she would die as she was.

There was nothing to be done, but to watch and wait.

In the gray twilight of the dying day, Sir Martin Metherell sat beside his wife's bed, watching, with sad, remorseful eyes, her pallid, drawn face.

He had brought her to this—he knew it. The story of his sin had stricken her down.

Were the evil fruit of his deed to have no end? he wondered, despairingly.

If but, in the hour of his temptation, he could have foreseen the consequences, how much he might have been saved!

He had never cared for the woman lying so strangely still upon her handsome bed; but they had spent twenty-two years of life together.

She had been a good wife to him, and now they were parting for ever—and through him.

Death and destruction seemed to follow in his path.

His thoughts became too bitter and awful for endurance.

The air of the quiet, shadowy room seemed to strifle him.

Then the white hand resting on the silken coverlet moved, and Lady Metherell's eyes slowly opened and rested upon him.

He bent eagerly forward.

'Clara!—wife!' he whispered, hoarsely an agony of entreaty in his frantically uttered words, as he gathered her fingers in his. 'My poor girl!'

He never forgot the expression which grew upon her face—such horror, such aversion, that he sank upon his knees, bowing his head to shut out the sight of it.

And when, at length, he lifted it again, Clara, Lady Metherell, had passed away.

CHAPTER XVII.

It was summer again.

The roses were in bloom, and tall white lilies scented the warm, balmy air.

Sir Henry and Lady Ayerst had wintered abroad, and, after a gay London season, had come down to Royal Heath for six weeks' rest, it a house full of visitors, and a long list of engagements, could be called rest.

But Lady Ayerst was a leading beauty and a woman of fashion, and could not do as humble folk, even though there had come upon her a strange longing for the quiet and peace of Fairfield.

She drove over there one day, and sat in the trim little garden, so sweet and odorous with its borders of old-fashioned flowers.

There was no sound but the cooing of the pigeons on the stable roof.

Daisies stared up at the blue sky from the smooth green lawn.

The daisies were an eye sore to Mrs. Lorraine; she regretted their presence as she sat beneath the tree with her daughter.

'They are a perfect pest. It seems impossible to get rid of them. They entirely spoil the lawn.'

Madge stooped, and, plucking one, daintily picked it to pieces.

'I believe Shirley,' she said, 'thinks they improve the look of it.'

'Shirley never thinks the same as other people,' Mrs. Lorraine declared, impatiently. 'She is the most self-willed, headstrong girl I have ever met with. It breaks my heart when I think of how she has willfully thrown away her chances. She might have been married now, had she not been such a little fool. My dear Madge, I cannot express to you my feelings when I see that nasty, black-eyed little Frenchwoman, driving about in the Metherell carriages, and giving herself the airs of an empress. They are to be married this summer. It is shameful. Had only poor Lady Metherell lived, things would have been very different; but I really believe Sir Martin is out of his mind.'

'When do you expect Shirley home?'

Madge asked.

She was rather tired of the Metherell topic.

Every letter had mother had written for the last six or seven months had contained but little else.

'Next week,' Mrs. Lorraine replied, with a peevish puckering of her brows. 'I trust she will not be home for long. I feel too angry with the child to want her here.'

'Poor Shirley! Lady Ayerst remarked, as she dropped the daisy-head on to the grass. 'You had better send her to me when she returns. I must see what I can do for her.'

'But, Sir Henry?'

'He can scarcely object to my own sister. But, if you remember, dear, they were never at all friendly.'

'And are never likely to be,' Madge said with an odd little laugh. 'I shall expect her next week.'

It was about eight days later that Shirley went to Royal Heath.

She was delighted at the prospect of seeing her sister again.

It seemed to her the first pleasant thing that had occurred since she had walked behind her as chief bridesmaid up the aisle of Coddington Church.

And yet, as they met, her first feeling was one of disappointment.

Madge had altered.

She seemed to have grown taller, prouder, haughtier.

She was exquisitely dressed, and had the quiet, self-possessed manners of a grand lady.

Shirley felt that Madge Lorraine had gone for ever.

Lady Ayerst was quite a different person. 'You are very quiet,' Madge said, as they drove from the station to Royal Heath. 'What is the matter with you?'

'I am trying to get used to you,' Shirley answered. 'You have altered so entirely, I can't believe you are Madge.'

'I am hardly believe it myself sometimes,' the elder girl said, and a shadow fell across her lovely face. 'Do you know, I rather like looking back to the days when an imitation pearl necklace, and a wee diamond heart, constituted nearly the whole of my jewellery?'

'They constitute almost the whole of mine,' Shirley laughed. 'They are certainly the most valuable of my possessions.'

'It is your own fault.'

'I know that.'

'Why did you do it?'

Shirley's eyes darkened.

'Why? Why, because I felt I would rather drown myself in the nearest pond than marry him. I—I could not like him in that way; it was no use; and I'm not like you—I don't care so much about being rich. I would rather be free.'

Lady Ayerst bowed to a passing friend, then she said—

'Perhaps you were right, and it really does not matter, now that I am in a position to take you into society. You are certain to have some good chances.'

'I don't want any, thanks. I have made up mind to be an old maid.'

Madge laughed.

'My dear child, don't be so absurd. You are an old maid! What a future to look forward to! You want a tonic, Shirley, for I am certain you must be in a very weak state of health to have such morbid notions.'

'You have not altered so very much, after all,' Shirley said. 'That is just the way you used to talk.'

'Is it? Well, I honestly think it is you who have really changed the most. I can't quite make you out. You have not been very happy lately, have you?'

'Oh, I have been all right,' Shirley declared; but her lip quivered, and Madge saw it.

She wondered why it was, and what the reason could be for the change in her young sister.

Her mother's disappointment and querulous temper could hardly have wrought it, especially as Shirley had been so much from home.

She glanced at the pretty, delicate face, with its strangely wistful eyes.

Was it possible she had formed an entanglement with some undesirable young man?

Her thoughts went back to the artist, who had suddenly sprung into such favour.

They had met him several times in town; but, until this moment, Madge had forgotten that he and Shirley had been friends.

Had she cared for him so much—did she still care for him?

It was not likely, and yet—well, Shirley was not quite like anyone else.

She thought of that night when the girl had come sobbing to her—and then the carriage drew up before the portals of Royal Heath, and the powdered footman had sprung from the box, and was opening the door.

Madge led the way up the broad steps to the great entrance-hall, on the threshold of which a solemn and portly butler was standing.

'The ladies are in the morning-room,' he informed his mistress.

There was also a telegram for her ladyship, which a very tall footman gravely handed to her on a heavy silver salver.

She opened it in a leisurely way as she crossed the hall, saying to Shirley, as she did so—

'Henry is in town, you know. I dare say this is to say we are not to expect him tonight.'

Then her eyes fell on the message, and a slight exclamation of surprise escaped her.

'Not bad news?' Shirley asked.

'No—oh, no!'

She turned to the butler.

'Bodkin, the master is coming by the six-twenty. He is bringing a gentleman with him. I think, Shirley, you have met him before—Vivian West, the artist.'

The announcement was so entirely unexpected that the girl could only repeat, in a hoarse little whisper, 'Vivian West!' while every atom of color fled from her face.

Madge, under pretence of speaking to a favourite dog, gave her time to recover herself.

She had very quickly discovered the cause of Shirley's altered appearance and manner.

Well, he was a rising man, and likely to become a great one—perhaps a rich one—but Shirley might have done so much better.

It was a thousand pities Sir Henry had chosen to invite him just now.

Thought passed so quickly.

Lady Ayerst had surveyed the position of affairs, had weighed the for and against, while she patted her poodle's head.

A minute later she was introducing Shirley to her friends, who bowed, and smiled, and shook hands with a mechanical graciousness, while the girl's heart seemed to throb out in passionate pain the name of Vivian West.

It appeared to her that long, weary years had passed since they two had parted on that wild autumn afternoon.

She could feel again the driving snow upon her face, as she stood outside the cottage-door, straining her eyes for a last glimpse of him as he strode through the storm, and then, afterwards, the quiet of the little kitchen, and the dull, ceaseless ache that had been with her ever since.

She had tried to forget him—had tried to interest herself in other people; but it had been in vain, and now at last, in a few short hours, they were to meet again.

She knew not whether she was glad or sorry.

It meant an intensity of suffering.

And yet, her whole soul thrilled with the thought of seeing him again.

Someone was speaking to her—the lady by whom she was sitting, and whose presence she had forgotten.

The low, rather complaining voice recalled her to the fact that she was sitting in a room-full of people.

'Such a beautiful day, is it not?' said the lady, as if it were a thing to be deplored.

'So hot,' she added with a sigh. 'I cannot stand the heat.'

'You prefer the winter?' Shirley said, striving to show some interest.

'Oh, no; the cold kills me—I perish, I die! I am a great invalid, you know,' with a charming smile. 'It is only by the exertion of doctors and nurses that I manage to exist at all. I have one with me now, such a dear creature—a perfect lady—so clever and capable. I should simply die if she left me.'

It seemed to Shirley, who little guessed who her companion was, that the lady's life really hung on a thread, and that she might expire at any moment.

The stranger was a little slip of a woman, with large pale blue eyes.

Later, Shirley discovered that she was Sir Henry's sister, who had just come from India, where she had left her husband.

Tea was brought in while they sat there by the open windows, and a party of men and girls, returning from a fishing expedition, sat on the grassy slope outside, and related their day's sport.

They were all very merry.

Everyone seemed in the highest of spirits, even the fragile invalid found strength to join in the general laugh that now and again broke forth.

They were all strangers to Shirley; at least, she thought so, till a tall man, entering by one of the windows, came up to her and held out his hand.

'I am so glad to meet you again, Miss Lorraine.'

It was Harold Ridley.

Shirley gave him the very coldest of welcomes; she could not forgive him for being engaged to Eva Ware.

But, in spite of her freezing reception, he seated himself beside her and entered into conversation.

As he talked, she noticed that he looked anything but happy.

There were deep lines about his eyes and mouth, which she did not remember noticing before.

He had, too, a reckless air of dissipation and was altogether quite unlike the Harold Ridley of a year ago.

Eva Ware had not improved him, Shirley thought; and then she wondered how he could have chosen a girl like that, when he might have had Lucy Brend.

Afterwards, when tennis was proposed, and everyone made a move for the garden, he sauntered out with her, and as they strolled along one of the smooth gravel paths, he inquired after the girl Shirley was thinking of.

'Have you heard from Miss Brend lately?'

'I have just been staying with her.'

'Is she not married yet?'

'Not yet.'

'I—I suppose she will be soon!'

'I suppose so.'

He smoothed his moustache, and they walked on in silence.

'Have I offended you?' he asked at last.

'No; how could you?'

'You gave me the impression that you were not pleased to see me.'

Shirley flushed; then, in her old impulsive way, blurted out the truth.

'The fact is, you are going to marry someone I don't like. Miss Ware and I were always deadly enemies.'

'And you now extend the feeling to me. Surely you, of all people, might have been a little kinder?'

Shirley looked at him in astonishment.

'Why?'

'Because,' he said, with a short harsh laugh, 'you know the truth. You are Miss Brend's friend.'

'I only know this,' she said, and her voice shook a little with excitement, 'you showed my friend a great deal of attention then suddenly proposed to someone else.'

'You know why.'

'I do not,' Shirley protested. 'It has always puzzled me. If there was any reason for the strange way in which you behaved, tell me.'

'Of what use to do so?' he asked with a

shrug of the shoulders. 'There is nothing to be gained by raking up the follies of a year ago. I thought you knew. I imagined she had told you. I thought a girl of that sort would naturally talk over her conquests.'

Shirley stood still in the pathway.

'Mr. Ridley,' she said, 'are you mad?'

'I was for the space of one night,' he answered. 'I am sane enough now.'

'And you believe that Lucy Brend thought she had made a conquest of you?'

'She fooled me till she got me to her feet, and, the very night she led me on to tell her how I loved her, she accepted Dorrien. They say all women are cruel. Nothing could have been more deliberate or cold-blooded than that.'

'It is all a mistake,' Shirley cried. 'She loved you better than anyone. I know that.'

He laughed incredulously.

'It looked like it!'

'It is true,' she persisted. 'I know all about it. It isn't my secret. I dare not tell you without her sanction; but she loved you—loved you with all her heart.'

'Great Heaven!' he exclaimed. 'Is this really true! She loved me—she?'

In his agitation, he was grasping her arm with such force that it hurt her.

The involuntary movement of pain that she made recalled him to himself.

'Forgive me!' he cried; 'I scarcely know what I am doing. How can I believe what you tell me, when I have the evidence of my senses to the contrary? Do you know what happened? Are you aware that, the night on which I was mad enough to think she cared for me, I found her in Dorrien's arms? Neither saw me; but I—my God! I shall never forget that moment—I have no recollection of what I said or did, but it all ended in my becoming engaged to Eva. Poor girl! She has a deuced bad bargain—a man who cannot offer her the smallest grain of affection. But I meant to make her a good husband one of these days. I was growing reconciled, and now you have stirred up the old feverish madness. I believed Lucy false and heartless and you have raised a doubt.'

He sank on to a rustic bench they had come to, and buried his face in his hands.

Shirley longed to tell him the whole truth of the case, yet dared not.

The better plan would be, she thought to bring these two together, and let them clear up the misunderstanding between them; then, surely, all would come right.

She laid her hand gently on the man's shoulder.

Her tender heart ached with pity, as she noticed his attitude of utter dejection.

He lifted his haggard face for a moment, and looked at her.

'You are very kind,' he said; 'but this has unmanned me. Do you mind returning alone?'

She went at once.

The birds were singing, and the grassy slopes of Royal Heath lay like bright green velvet in the brilliant sunshine.

As she walked slowly and thoughtfully back to the house, she came upon the invalid, reclining in a hammock chair, a person in the garb of a hospital nurse, attending upon her.