

## TO THE BITTER DREGS.

By the Author of "Cast up by the Sea," "The Fog Woman," "The Secret of White Towers," etc.

CONTINUED.

An hour later Martin Metherell was driving down that same road, on his way from the station to The Limes—his house. It was no big country residence, but a pretty little house in a large garden, which bore a rather neglected air, with the dead leaves lying thick on the paths and lawn, and the creeper trailing from the verandah, for Martin's father had left his second wife little beyond her own private income, which was small indeed for a woman as fond of dress and gaiety as Mrs. Metherell was.

She was drinking a solitary cup of tea in the drawing-room, when her step-son arrived.

"I am so glad you have come," she declared, languidly extending a very white hand to him. "I am literally bored to death in this dull little hole. Beside, I am simply expiring to hear the news. You saw him—it is all right, of course?"

She put her cup down, and eagerly scanned his moody face, her own growing alarmed as she looked.

"Don't keep me in suspense!" she cried, sharply, dropping her usual lackadaisical manner of speech. "Martin, you don't mean you—you cannot mean that he does not intend leaving you the money?"

"I do mean it," Metherell replied, sitting down, and fiercely twisting his moustache. "I think the old chap is out of his mind; but it is just like my cursed luck."

"But what reason has he given? Who is to have it? Oh, dear, I cannot believe it! This is awful!"

Mrs. Metherell was visibly agitated. She pressed her handkerchief to her lips; her hands trembled.

Within the last few weeks she had convinced herself that all the property would come to Martin, and from him, naturally, some of it would come to her.

The dreaming had been remarkably pleasant. The wakening took all the colour out of her face, leaving only a small patch of rouge on each cheek.

"Every halfpenny goes to beautiful Cousin Clara," Metherell said, savagely. "That stupid dowdy old maid! Mrs. Metherell cried. 'Good gracious how wicked!'"

"Unless," Metherell went on grimly, "I like to marry her. In that case, she is to hold the purse, and see that I don't spend too much."

"Marry her?" Mrs. Metherell repeated. "Why did you not tell me so at once? You did frighten me so. Well, she will be a nicely-gilded pill."

"Thanks. I don't intend to swallow her." "Martin!" Mrs. Metherell almost shrieked, "you won't be such a fool as to refuse?"

"You don't expect me to take a woman like that for my wife?"

"Oh, she isn't so bad as all that!" Mrs. Metherell declared, wishing she had not called her a dowdy old maid. "She is a lady, and some people might consider her handsome; and as to her dress—well, you can easily dress her decently. You must just make the best of her, and men don't really see much of their wives nowadays."

Metherell said nothing, but, leaning forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and stared gloomily before him.

He was thinking of his secret marriage, and of the fix he was in.

It was maddening to know that a whole fortune was being held out to him, yet he dared not stretch forth his hand to take it.

Mrs. Metherell was pouring him out some tea; she was smiling to herself.

Of course she thought, he was angry at having to marry the girl; but he would do it—there was no doubt of that.

She was rather startled, and spilt the milk in the saucer, when, with a bitter imprecation he rose, and left the room.

Lillian West, from the schoolroom window, saw him stride down the path, and fling open the gate.

She wondered where he was going, and a pang of disappointment shot through her tender heart, because he had never glanced towards her; but there was little time to think of him just then, for the children claimed all her attention—their frocks had to be changed, and their hair brushed, before they could go to the drawing-room.

It was only after they had gone chattering and squabbling downstairs, that she had time to wonder when Martin would come to her.

After a time she heard the click of the gate, then his step upon the gravel, and she flew to the window, and peered into the dusk.

A pebble struck the glass. She opened the casement and leaned out.

He was standing just beneath, and signed to her to come down.

They had often met like this, in the sweet, summer evenings, now gone by. Their trysting-place was by an old arbour, in an unfrequented part of the garden.

She made her way to it now, with step as light as air.

He was waiting for her, and, as of old, drew her into his arms, and kissed her. But he had changed, and, with the quick instinct of love, she felt it.

"Martin—husband!" she whispered, with her arms about his neck. "What is it—what is wrong?"

"How do you know there is anything wrong?"

"I saw you go out—you never looked up. You are worried, dearest?"

"Worried, yes—worried to death."

He passed his hand across his forehead. "Would to God! he thought, he had never met this girl. And then the old love,

which was still there, though eclipsed by the greed for money, swelled up in his heart, and turning her face to his he kissed her passionately.

"We will pull along, somehow," he said, with set teeth, "whatever comes we shall have one another."

"Always our love, she said, in her soft, cooing voice; then a little sigh escaped her lips, and she pressed her face against his breast.

"Martin," she said, timidly, "will it be long now, dear, before you tell?"

"No, no, not long," he answered; but his brows drew together in a frown. The question irritated him.

"I—I must soon go from here."

The words were scarcely above a whisper; but he heard them and understood.

"It will be all right," he said reassuringly. "Every one shall know soon that you are my wife. Don't fret about it, pet. Trust in me."

"I do," she said, lifting her shining eyes to his. "Never think that I could doubt you. Ah, Martin, must you go so soon?"

"Yes, darling, but I shall see you tomorrow. Don't fancy me unkind, pet, but I have so much to think of just now. Don't wait out here in the damp, but run indoors."

He kissed her, and went by a different path to the house, but had not gone many steps before he heard her voice softly calling him back.

As he turned, she ran to meet him. "Dear love," she said, tremulously, "good-night! Good-night!"

The moon gleaming through a rift in the clouds, shed its pale light on her lovely upturned face.

Afterwards, in the long years that followed, he remembered her as she looked then.

He sat up late that night, thinking of the tangled lines of his life.

It was about one o'clock, when a tapping at the window interrupted his gloomy thoughts.

Rising, he drew aside the blind, to find the face of Dola Koski pressed to the pane.

With an exclamation of annoyance and disgust, he opened the French window, and she stepped inside.

"Don't look so fierce, my friend," she said, with a laugh. "I have come to have a chat with you about—Lillian West. We have met—we have spoken. Oh!"—with a little gesture—she is charming."

"I will trouble you not to mention her name," Metherell said, frigidly. "I regret that I cannot ask you to remain here, but the hour—with a glance at the clock—'forbids my doing so.'"

"Since when," Dola asked, insolently, "have you grown so particular?"

He did not answer, but stood, with the window wide open, waiting for her to go.

"You are looking ill—bothered," she said, flashing her dark eyes over his face. "I expected to find you radiant, for I hear your cousin is dead, and you the heir to ever so many thousands a year."

"Quite an incorrect statement," he replied.

She seized him by the arm. "Don't speak to me like that," she cried, angrily. "It is too absurd; I am Dola, the girl you used to worship. Look at me. I have not altered. I have not changed."

She flung back the long cloak she was wearing, and stood before him; but her vivid beauty no longer possessed any charm for the man, yet it reminded him of the time when it had, and because of that time his manner became less haughty.

"Why have you come here?" he asked. She closed the window, and sat down.

"To see you," she said, "to hear from your own lips what you intend to do."

"I would give a great deal to be able to tell you," he replied, wearily.

"Are you going to marry her?"

"I have done so," he said, finding a relief in speaking out to someone; "and I would give my right hand—striking the table with it—to be able to undo what has been done."

And these words robbed the news of its bitterness for Dola.

"You have tired of her so soon?"

"Not that," he cried, pacing up and down the room. "I care for her as truly as I can care for anyone; but—well, she stands between me and my uncle's money. I am to have it on condition that I marry my cousin."

"And he is furious because you already have a wife?"

"He has no idea of it. No one knows it but you, and I, and Lillian, the parson who married us, and the old sexton and his wife who were witnesses."

"But her people?" Dola questioned.

"She has none, poor girl; she is an orphan."

"So much the better for you my friend."

"What do you mean?"

He paused in his restless pacing, to look at the girl's face.

She was playing with a cigarette holder, and did not meet his glance, as she answered, in a slow, deliberate way—

"I mean that it makes it easier for you to get rid of her."

"What do you mean?" he asked again, and his voice sounded harsh and strained even to his own ears.

Dola raised her head, and looked at him.

"You cannot throw away a fortune," she said. "Think what it means to you; you must of course, do as your uncle wishes."

"A man is not allowed two wives," he said, with a grim smile.

"No; you must get rid of one."

There was silence between them.

He stood waiting for her to speak, hating himself for doing so, loathing himself for not turning upon her for making such a suggestion, yet painfully anxious for her next words.

She broke the silence with a short laugh. "How dense you men are! I see an easy way out of the difficulty. Tell her the marriage is not legal—that you already had a wife. She is one of the meek, quiet sort; she would make no stir about it."

"She would break her heart," he said, hoarsely.

"Have I broken mine? And no woman on earth could love you more passionately than I."

"This is altogether different," he argued, struggling to be true. "She believes herself to be my wife—she will be the mother of my child. It—can't be done."

Dola clenched her hands. "How she hated this Lillian West!"

"It must be done," she said, firmly, "unless you prefer to lose a fortune. Love won't last forever, and where will you be then? I see you in a stuffy little house, with a family to keep on nothing a year; for you are not one of the men who can make money, Martin Metherell."

He knew what she said was true. No words came to his lips.

He sat down and rested his throbbing head on his hands.

"I could not do it," he groaned at last. "I will see her for you," Dola said. "She will go away, you will have no trouble, and you will be free. Shall I do it?"

He looked at her with haggard eyes. "Are you a devil," he asked, bitterly, "that you sit there and tempt me to this awful deed? Do you know what you are doing? Do you know you are urging me to ruin a woman who has trusted me?"

"I am urging you to save yourself, she replied, quietly, though her dark eyes gleamed with anger. "But if you don't care for my advice or help,—she stood up making a sweeping gesture with her hands—there is nothing more to be said. Good night."

She drew her cloak around her and stepped to the window.

Metherell watched her movements. She was vanishing into the night when he staggered to his feet, his face working convulsively, his fingers clenching and unclenching.

"To-morrow night," he said, in a thick gasping voice; "I will decide by then."

It would be impossible to tell how Metherell suffered during the day which followed that night of temptation.

What words could describe his agony of mind, while the awful fight went on between the good and the bad within him?

He left the house in the early morning, and walked far away, caring not whether he went, driven forth by the terrible dread he had of meeting his young wife.

He felt that her gaze would read his guilty thoughts, and see how base and worthless he was.

He pictured the horror in her eyes, and then he tried to shut her from his thoughts altogether, to think of her only in the abstract, as a woman who might drag him to ruin, an obstacle in his path.

In this world it was every man for himself; he had not made the world; he could not help the suffering; and oh! great Heavens! was he not suffering enough himself?

And so his mind worked on and on, and when the day was over and the light fading out of the sky, he told himself he was still undecided; but in his secret heart he knew the answer Dola Koski would receive that night.

It was past ten when he returned to The Limes.

From the gate he could see a slim, dark figure at the open schoolroom window.

Lillian was watching for him, he knew. He set his teeth hard.

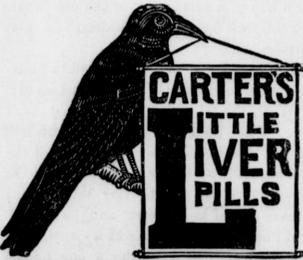
He must speak to her.

He was thankful for the darkness, which hid his face from her.

"Martin," she called, softly, "is it you? Where have you been all day?"

"I scarcely know," he answered, truthfully enough. "I have had an awful time of it, Lil and am lagged to death. Good-night."

"Good-night," she echoed, and he went into the house.



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For long afterwards she stood there, looking out into the darkness.

A great sadness oppressed her—a sense of coming evil hung heavily upon her.

She tried to cast it off, to cheer herself by picturing the happy future every day was how bringing nearer to her; but all in vain.

One kiss—one endearing word from the man she loved so well, would have chased the shadows away.

But he never came, and the girl's eyes were heavy with unshed tears, and when at length she gave up hope, and crept away to bed.

Downstairs, Metherell was sleeping from sheer exhaustion, and only awoke to find Dola standing before him, watching him.

So deep and dreamless had been his sleep, that as he opened his eyes and saw the familiar figure, he smiled, wondering vaguely why she was there.

Then, as the whole horror of the day came rushing back upon him, all the comeliness left his handsome face. He shuddered as he slowly changed his position.

"So you have come," he said.

"As you wished me to," she replied; then after a pause, which he showed no inclination to break; "What is it to be, yes or no?"

He made no immediate answer.

There was no need for him to argue the matter further; he had gone through it all, over and over again.

Dola waited, motionless, for him to speak.

When at length he did so, he shaded his face from the light, as if he did not wish even her to see it.

"How do you propose to do it?"

Dola frowned impatiently. All the while she was thinking with biting bitterness, "He did not care when he cast me off."

"Leave that to me," she said.

"Only on one condition," he returned. "It is, that you show her what womanly kindness and sympathy you are capable of, and that you do not lose sight of her, for I intend to help her, to place her beyond all want. She need never know it came from me. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

She had tact enough to hide the exultation she felt at having gained her desire to separate the man she loved from the woman he loved.

She had also the sense to stay no longer, lest, in a sudden fit of remorse, he refused to let her act.

She had been gone some time before he was aware of the fact; then, staring round the room with wild dazed eyes, he sprang to his feet, and rushed to the window, calling her by name—

"Dola, Dola, for Heaven's sake come back!"

But the night wind whispering in the trees was the only answer he received.

#### CHAPTER III.

"Oh, Miss West Darling, isn't it horrid of Martin. He has gone!"

Lillian was putting out the books for the morning's lessons.

The bright October sunlight, glinting on her hair, turned it to burnished gold.

The sky was blue, the birds were singing—it was a day on which to be glad; but for the governess the beauty of it all faded away, as Flossie blurted out the news.

He left by the early train before breakfast, the child went on. "Even mamma did not know he was going so early. He wasn't a bit nice or jolly this time. I wonder what has happened to him? There is Dot in the garden—it isn't quite lesson time yet, Miss West."

Flossie raced off to her sister, while Miss West, sinking on to the nearest chair, gave way for a moment or so to the bitterness of this disappointment.

He had never before gone away without bidding her good-bye.

She thought of the last time—the kisses, the vows, the regrets.

What had happened to him?

What could this terrible trouble be which was taking him from her?

"Patience," she said, aloud. "Patience; it will all come right."

But she sighed as she rose, and went on with her work.

The morning dragged out its weary length, the children were unusually troublesome, and it was with a sense of thankfulness she heard that Mrs. Metherell intended taking them with her during the afternoon.

When they had gone, Lillian West sat down to write a letter to Martin.

There was no complaining in it—scarcely a word of her disappointment at the way in which he had gone; but every line breathing a pure, unselfish love, such as few are good and noble enough to give.

She was ending her letter, when the servant came to say that there was a lady waiting downstairs to see her.

She looked up, in surprise, at the information.

"A lady to see me! You must be mistaken, Mary."

"She asked for you, miss," Mary declared. "But she wouldn't give her name."

Lillian went into her room to wash an ink-stain from her fingers; then she ran down to her visitor, wondering who it could be, for she was far away from all old friends, and no one ever came to The Limes to see her.

Mary had shown the lady into the drawing-room.

She was standing by the fire when the girl entered the room—a small, slim figure in a dark cloth costume.

"You are Miss West?" she said, extending her hand, and speaking with a slightly foreign accent. "My name is Koski—Dola Koski. Perhaps you have heard of me."

"I have heard of Dola Koski, the singer," Lillian replied, wondering still more why this lady should have called upon her. "Will you not sit down?"

"Thank you," Dola seated herself, and meditatively stroked her muff; then, rais-

ing her great dark eyes, looked straight at her companion.

"You are surprised that I should come here—it is not pleasure that has brought me. I have come here to perform a very painful task."

"Yes?" Lillian West said, faintly. She had no more idea of what was coming, but Dola Koski's strangely impressive manner frightened her.

"Captain Metherell is a friend of yours?"

"Yes." She met the dark gaze quite calmly, though the hot blood rushed to the roots of her curling hair.

"He is more than a friend? He is—your lover?"

"You must excuse my answering such a question," the girl said, with quiet pride. "You are a complete stranger to me and—"

"To you," Dola interrupted, with one of her quick gestures; "but I have known Martin Metherell for some time—it is he who sent me to speak to you."

"Martin Metherell sent you to me?" Lillian exclaimed incredulously. "Will you kindly explain why he has done so?"

"He has sent me," Dola said slowly, as if gloating over her words, "because he is so cowardly to tell you himself that he can never be more to you than your lover. You believe yourself his wife—you are not."

Lillian West had slowly risen to her feet, her eyes starting from her white stricken face.

"It is false!" Lillian gasped, clinging to the chair for support. "He never sent you to tell me that. He could not, for he knows I am his wife."

Dola Koski smiled.

"He wished you to believe so while it suited him," she said. "But now it suits him better to let you know the truth."

"I was married in church," Lillian cried, wildly. "I have my marriage certificate."

"Nevertheless," the other returned, you are not his wife, and never will be, for he had one living when he married you. She was my own sister, so I know the story is true. He tired of her, and deserted her. You are no worse treated than others have been."

A low, despairing cry broke from the girl's white lips, as she sank to the floor, hiding her face in her hands.

When she looked up, the expression of it might have softened any but a heart hardened by fierce, unreasoning jealousy.

"Bring her here to me—this sister of yours—and let him come also, for only from him will I believe this story true."

"He will not come," Dola said, affecting some emotion. "And she cannot, for she is