

## TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

(Continued.)  
"I did not hear you," he said. "I had no idea you were there."  
He felt confused, bewildered.  
Cora's strange, emphatically-spoken words were echoing in his ears.  
Was it possible—could it be possible—that she really knew the secret of his life?

He thought of the scrap of paper she had shown him long ago.  
Then Shirley's voice recalled him to the fact that she was still regarding him in a wondering way.

"Why did Cora disappear like that?"  
"I don't know," he answered, vaguely. She said "Good-bye." She is going to-morrow."

"You need not have held both her hands!"  
"I! You were mistaken, darling. I—"  
He stopped short, for it had suddenly flashed upon him that he might have been holding Cora's hands.

In the excitement of the moment, he had been scarcely conscious of what he did.  
"Well?"  
"I don't think I was holding her hands," Shirley felt the blood creeping hotly to her cheeks.

Was it possible that he—her hero—could stoop to a secret flirtation with Cora Rozier?

Even as the thought came to her she put it away as utterly unworthy.

"Vivian," she said, slipping her hand within his arm, I felt quite jealous when I saw you standing like that. Why—why did you do it?"

"She was telling me something—something which was a great surprise to me. Forgive me Shirley; I feel dazed."

He lifted his hat, and brushed back his curly hair.

She waited for him to tell her what it was that Cora had said to him; but after he had walked some little distance in silence, he began talking, with a visible effort, about something else.

"Did you come over on your bicycle?"

"Yes."

"It is a glorious day for a spin."

"Yes; it was grand coming along."

She tried to appear as usual; but she felt too hurt and disappointed to hide it altogether, though he did not appear to notice any difference in her manner.

She was too proud to mention Cora's name again, and after a while, she said she had some shopping to do in the village, and left him.

He did not offer to go with her, nor did he ask her to stay longer.

He seemed, as he had said, dazed.

She waved him a smiling adieu; but, directly she was out of sight, her face grew grave, and her eyes had a half-frightened expression in their blue depths.

"What is it? What can it mean?" she cried to herself. "Oh, why has he made me so wretched?"

Then, as she turned a bend of the road, she came upon Cora, who motioned her to stop.

She did so, reluctantly.

"I would wish you 'Good-bye,' Cora said; and, also, I would offer you an apology for running away a short while ago."

"I did not notice that you did so," Shirley returned, coldly. "Are you going away?"

"I leave to-morrow. I was telling Monsieur West, when you came upon us."

"Well, I hope you will have a pleasant journey. You will excuse me; but I am in a hurry."

That day was a black one for Shirley. She could think of nothing but Cora Rozier and the strange way Vivian had behaved.

He never came to her home now; and though in the afternoon she drove through the village two or three times, she saw no sign of him anywhere, and finally, went home in as miserable a state of mind as it was possible to be in.

To make matters worse, she found Captain Kemp seated in the drawing-room, and, having rushed in, she could not very well rush out again, even though she hated the gentleman with a particularly lively hatred.

He was rather nice-looking in an insipid way, with light blue eyes, fair hair, and small straight nose.

He had lately come into a lot of money, was a great swell, and thought Shirley Loraine the prettiest girl in the county.

"Aw, Miss Loraine," he drawled, "awfully glad to see you, you know. You always seem to be out when I call!"

Shirley, unsmilingly, presented him with the tips of her fingers.

Mrs. Loraine began talking very quickly. She felt nervously uncomfortable as to what Shirley might do or say.

"My daughter is a great lover of outdoor life, Captain Kemp. Such nice quiet walks about here. You have been driving, have you not, dear? And how is the new house getting on, captain? I see you are building very extensive green-houses."

"Aw, yes; they are pretty fair. I shall be pleased to take you ladies over the house any day you like. When will you come, Miss Shirley?"

"It is impossible to say," she replied, frigidly. "My time is very much occupied just at present."

"Oh, come, you really don't expect me to believe that?" he laughed. "I know something of how ladies spend their days. I have two sisters, you know."

"Indeed! with polite indifference."

"We met your elder sister last year," Mrs. Loraine hastened to say. "Such a charming girl!"

"It is very kind of you to say so. I believe she was down here last autumn. Now

Miss Loraine, seriously, what day may I take you over The Towers? I should like to hear your opinion of some of the rooms."

"I haven't an opinion about that sort of thing. I think an unfinished house the most depressing sight imaginable. I don't take any interest in 'bricks.'"

"They are putting in the windows."

"Yes?"

"I am having a new patent fastener—awful cunning dodge—bound to baffle any burglar."

Shirley gave a little disdainful laugh. "Fancy, a burglar in Coddington! Most of the people sleep with their doors open."

"Aw, really—perhaps they have nothing to lose, you know."

"Perhaps."

Shirley was certainly not at all entertaining.

In fact, Mrs. Loraine's fingers itched to box her ears, she was so tantalizing.

At the same time she looked so uncommonly pretty that Captain Kemp found sufficient enjoyment in staring at her.

When, at length, he had departed, Mrs. Loraine gave vent to her feelings in a long lecture on Shirley's behavior.

"You made me blush for you," she declared, angrily winding a ball of wool for some fancy work she was doing. "No one would believe you were my daughter. I am thankful—thankful beyond measure—that Madge was not present. I have half a mind to pack you off to boarding school until you learn the manners of a gentleman."

Shirley laughed, but not very mirthfully. She was holding the skein of wool on her slim, sunburnt hands, so could not escape.

She was beginning to feel very tired of this continual warfare—very sick and tired of it on this particular afternoon, when everything seemed to be going wrong.

Mrs. Loraine continued her complaint, while the girl patiently stood until the last strand of peacock-blue Berlin was drawn from her fingers.

Then she quietly left the room, and, going to her own, shut herself in.

"I am beginning to wish," she said, and the tears swelled into her eyes, "that I had never been born. One is permitted to very little happiness in this miserable old world, that it really is not worth thinking about."

The next day it rained rained from morning till night—not a gentle persistent fall, but a regular downpour.

The wind moaned dimly.

The weather had turned suddenly cold and raw.

One felt that winter had come with a rush, and the warm, bright days were gone for aye.

Shirley thought that day the longest she had ever lived through.

The minutes crept by like hours.

She was continually listening to find if the clock had stopped; but its quiet tick-tick-tick went on without break.

Had it not been for what had occurred the morning before, she would have buttoned herself in her macintosh, and, braving the elements, driven the pony-trap up to Metherell Court; but, as it was, she felt that some explanation was due to her from Vivian.

So she sat at home and grieved, and wondered what Cora Rozier could possibly have done to make him behave so strangely.

Cora had said, and he had said, that she was wishing him "Good-bye."

Would that have taken all the colour from his face, and given his eyes that startled expression she had noticed as he turned towards her?

And, if it was not that, what was it? She felt almost faint with apprehension.

He had been living in the same house with Cora.

They had probably seen much of one another.

She had never thought of it before.

Until yesterday morning she had never given Cora Rozier a moment's consideration.

Men admired her, they found her fascinating, and she was decidedly pretty.

So she thought the whole of that long wet day, and awoke the next morning with a sense of some great trouble hanging over her.

A letter was lying beside her plate on the breakfast-table.

She saw, at a glance, it was from Vivian West, and, with quick eager fingers, opened the envelope.

"My Darling," it ran,—"I have been undecided all this afternoon, whether to come over and see you or not."

"The fear that if I did so, your mother would be annoyed, and so make it unpleasant for you, has kept me from coming."

"I am going up to town to-morrow, on business. I do not know how long I shall be away. It may be but for one day, it may be for longer. I wish I could have seen you before going; but, perhaps, it is better so."

"My own love, my one dear love, good-bye."

"Yours always,"

"Vivian West."

He was going away, and he had not come to see her, and this was all he cared to write!

What had happened to him?

Was he growing tired of her?

She stretched out her hands, as if to ward off some evil, crying, brokenly—

"Oh, God! not that—not that!"

She knew nothing of the thoughts which

had filled his mind as he penned that letter to her.

He had written another, a long one, in which he had tried to explain his queer behaviour when she had found him with Cora.

He spoke of the strength of his love, and of how she was all the world to him.

It was a letter which would have made Shirley happy; but which, when he had written it, he felt he had no right to send.

Heaven alone knew what Cora Rozier had told him, or how it might affect his life.

So he tore that long epistle in half, and wrote the one which Shirley received, and which she read again and again, trying to glean some comfort from it, and ever finding less and less.

The night on which Cora had visited Sir Martin in his study, a brilliant and daring scheme had unfolded itself to her.

A scheme whereby she was to gain all those things that, at Gilbert's death, she had feared were lost to her.

This was what her ingenious brain had suggested to her—a marriage with Vivian West.

It had seemed at first, even to her, a rather difficult task to accomplish; but the more she thought of it, the easier it became.

She intended to leave the Court with her five thousand pounds, but to arrange, beforehand, a meeting with Vivian.

He would come to see her.

She would tell him that he was the illegitimate son of Sir Martin Metherell.

She would have to trust to luck and her own cunning to prevent any explanation between the two men.

She would also have to arrange a complete estrangement between Vivian and Shirley.

She had no fear she would not succeed. She was born to intrigue: it was life to her, and came to her as easily as did her breath.

When he was dishonored and alone, she would stand by him.

He would look upon her as his one friend.

It would be strange, indeed, if she could not manage the rest.

So far fortune had favoured her.

Vivian West had pitied her, offered her his friendship, and still more to the point, believed in her.

She felt she had laid the foundation of her triumph, and as she travelled up to London that soaking wet day, she pictured herself returning with Vivian West, in all honor and glory, Sir Vivian and Lady Metherell, of Metherell Court.

She took out her cheque, and looked at it with a satisfied grin.

"He can't last long," she said, returning it to her purse. "And, if he doesn't go off when everything is pleasantly settled, I shall feel inclined to help him into the other world." She laughed softly, rubbing her hands together. "Ma foi, you are clever, Cora! You are marvellous."

On arriving in London, she drove straight to an hotel.

Another cab pulled up at the same time as her own.

They came from opposite directions, so faced each other.

Cora gave an exclamation of astonishment, as the occupant of the other cab alighted.

In an instant she was also standing in the rain, her black eyes sparkling with delight.

"Nurse Patience, it is, indeed, you!" Nurse Patience who was paying the cabman, started at hearing herself addressed.

"Mademoiselle Rozier!" she said, in gentle surprise. "Are you staying here?"

"For a few days, yes. I have but just arrived, and you, of all people, are the one I would most desire to meet. I want to talk to you. I must see you alone. Is Lady Gildare here?"

"She travelled from Glare Hall last week took a slight chill, and has been confined to her bed ever since. I have been executing some commission to her. You will excuse my not staying now, for she will be waiting for me."

The porter had a litter of parcels from the cab, and carried them into the hotel.

Nurse Patience was about to follow them but Cora held her back.

"What I have to say to you is of the utmost importance," she said emphatically. "Will you come to my room this evening? I will send you the number."

The elder woman looked into her face in half-shrinking wonder.

"I shall be at liberty about eight," she said. "I will come then."

Cora awaited the hour with impatience. She felt certain this nurse had much to

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tell, it she could only be persuaded to tell it.

During this unexpected meeting she had been struck afresh by the strange likeness to Vivian West.

The lines of each face were identical.

"It is no coincidence," Cora said to herself, with conviction, as she thought the matter over while waiting for Nurse Patience.

It was much past eight when, at length, she came.

Lady Gildare had wanted her; she could not get away before, she said.

Cora had engaged a private sitting-room and had ordered a fire to be lighted.

She motioned Nurse Patience to a chair beside it, and took one opposite to her.

"I want you to tell me," she began, speaking very impressively, "what you know of Sir Martin Metherell?"

The nurse put up her hand, as if to shelter her face from the heat.

"Sir Martin Metherell!" she repeated, faintly. "How can I know anything of him?"

"That is what I would learn. I ask, not because I am curious, but because I have had a peep behind the scenes of Sir Martin's life. I once held certain papers belonging to my mother, Dola Koski. They related to a child named Vivian West. Sir Martin knew I possessed them—he stole and destroyed them; but there was one left. This is it!"

She held the slip of paper towards Nurse Patience, who almost tore it from her fingers.

Her face was white as death.

"What else have you?" she cried, lifting her great tragic eyes from the soiled scrap of paper. "Why do you show me this? Oh, Heaven! what is that you mean?"

Cora watched the nurse's agitation with a quiet smile.

She felt that Fate had, indeed, been kind to bring them together in this way.

"What was that child to you?" she asked. And the scorching color that dyed the other's pallor answered her. "He was your son," she said. "Where is he now?"

"He died."

The nurse's agonised face was hidden in her hands.

"You saw him die?"

"Dola Koski took him from me. She said it was better so. Afterwards—she told me—he was dead. Oh, mademoiselle, for what purpose are you tearing my heart with these recollections? They are always with me, it is true; but, to speak of them—to recall them in this way—"

Great tearful sobs choked her utterance.

"I am sorry to pain you," Cora said softly; "but I do so for the sake of another—one who has also suffered. Your son did not die. He is living now."

A ray of passionate hope gleamed in Lilian West's eyes, but only to die as quickly as it came.

"I know whom you mean," she said sadly; "but it is a mistake. I also thought—"

"I have made no mistake," Cora declared. "I guessed the truth, and Sir Martin, thinking that I knew, confessed. To-morrow you shall see and know your son. I have worked hard to bring you together. In return, I but ask you to tell me your story. I have heard one version. I would like to know the truth."

But Nurse Patience was incapable of speaking.

The shock had been too much for her. She gave a strange little gasping sigh, and fell back insensible.

It was some time before Cora could restore her.

She looked like a wild wraith of a woman when at length she opened her eyes, her hair, with this water Cora had dashed over her, clinging to her ashen face.

"My son!" she kept repeating in broken tremulous accents; "my son!"

And then, at length, Cora learnt the secret of Sir Martin Metherell's life, and she knew this sorrowing, broken-hearted woman had borne, all her days, a burden of shame which was not hers to bear.

One word from her could have lifted the crushing weight from those weary shoulders.

But the thought of uttering that word never entered her head.

She was playing a game of her own, the winning of which meant all she most prized.

No touch of pity softened her heart as she listened to the low, sad voice recalling the tragedy of a life and the lonely years that had followed.

But she acted the role of sympathizer perfectly.

She cried a little, and said how thankful she was that it had lain in her power to render this service, and, finally, insisted upon going to Lady Gildare's room, to amuse her while Nurse Patience rested and recovered herself.

Her ladyship was delighted to have someone to chat to.

Cora found her sitting up in bed, arrayed in a beautiful pale-blue dressing-jacket. A pile of pillows were at her back, books and magazines were strewn about the bed, where her fretful hand had flung them.

A dish of hot-house fruit and a vase of flowers stood on a table beside her.

"You look very cozy," Cora said, gaily, after the first greetings. "You make me quite long to be ill."

"Oh, don't say that!" Lady Gildare cried, opening her pale eyes reproachfully. "It is tempting Providence. I never say those sort of things. An invalid has so much time for reflection; it makes one rather serious. I have been in bed a week so tired of it! Take some of those grapes—they come from Glare Hall. Now tell me all the news. I am too weak to say much. You must talk, and I shall listen."

"What a very pleasant party we were at Royal Heath. Who would have thought all those terrible things were going to happen? I see you are in mourning, poor girl!—very sad I am sure I said to Nurse, 'Poor girl, I pity her.'"

"The Ayrists are still in Scotland, popping away at the grouse. They have sent me some several times. Dear Madge is very attentive. And how is her sister? I took quite a fancy to Shirley—so pretty—I admire that colored hair. Yours is quite

black, is it not? Ah! I used to have such a wealth of golden hair; but illness spoils everything."

Lady Gildare's feeble strength allowed her to babble on the whole of the hour that Cora sat with her, and she would not doubt have continued for another hour had not Nurse Patience appeared with a tray of soup, jelly, and finger-biscuits.

"You will come in to-morrow?" she implored, as her visitor rose to go. "I have so enjoyed seeing you. I declare you have quite cheered me up. I shall expect you in the morning so do not disappoint me. I get so depressed if I am disappointed."

Cora promised to come.

Lady Gildare was wealthy, and in good society.

She might be a useful friend to have, and Mademoiselle Rozier determined to cultivate her acquaintance.

She worked on the principle of never letting a chance go by, and, hitherto, had found it a plan which answered excellently well.

The next day, late in the afternoon, Vivian West was shown into her room.

He was an hour behind the time she had expected him, and she was beginning to fear that something might have interfered with her plans, when he was announced.

"Ah, monsieur, at last!" she exclaimed. "I was thinking that, perhaps, you did not intend to come—that something had prevented you."

"Nothing," he said, gravely, would have prevented my coming to hear what you say you have to tell me. The suspense has been hard to bear. Pardon my asking you not to prolong it."

"There is no need to. You thought me cruel for not speaking before. I dared not. I feared Sir Martin Metherell. You look surprised, monsieur. What will you say when I tell you that the man you consider your best friend is, in reality, your worst enemy. He has been good to you to ease his conscience but he is a devil."

And then Cora, with many French phrases and foreign gestures told the story of his birth.

Told it with a force and truth which carried conviction with every word.

Yet