

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED.
CHAPTER XIV.

The sittings for Shirley's portrait had commenced. The studio at Metherell Court had been put in order, and there, once or twice a week, Shirley sat for an hour or so, while Vivian West worked at his canvas, talking the while, in his pleasant fascinating way, to Lady Metherell, who sat and stitched throughout each interview.

At those times Shirley wondered why she agreed to let him paint her. Every meeting was fraught with such pain, that, at times, she felt she must rush from the room, unable to endure it longer. His eyes never softened when they looked at her.

If he smiled, it was in the coldest way possible. She felt he had shut her for ever from his thoughts—that she was nothing, absolutely nothing to him. His hatred and contempt would have been easier to bear than this polite indifference.

There had been a discussion, at first, as to how she should be painted; a discussion in which West showed little or no interest, until Shirley settled the matter herself, by donning a white muslin fichu and picturesque hat, around the crown of which was a wreath of pink roses.

It was a hat she had worn in the summer-time, when she and Vivian West had wandered together by the shining sea. Perhaps some thought of reminding him of those days prompted her to wear it for her picture.

If so, she was bitterly disappointed, for, when she entered the studio, he turned to her with a glance of disapproving criticism. "Is this what you have decided to wear?" She lifted her wistful eyes to his.

"Yes—will it suit you?" He smiled in that way which always seemed to stab her through the heart.

"If you are all pleased with the result, I am quite satisfied."

"It is Miss Lorraine's own choice," Lady Metherell said, looking up from her fancy work. "Do you not like it?"

"I have seen Miss Lorraine more becomingly attired," he answered, unconcernedly mixing some colours on his palette. "But this will do very well. Will you sit there?"

Shirley took the seat that had been prepared for her. "Had he forgotten?" she wondered, "or had he grown to dislike everything that reminded him of the days when he cared for her?"

When she went home that day, she crushed the hat into a wardrobe, and the next time went without it. He did not appear to notice the difference until he had been painting for some minutes; then he said—

"You have forgotten your hat, Miss Lorraine."

"I do not intend to wear it," she said. "You changeable child!" Lady Metherell cried. "You never know your own mind."

Vivian West gave a low, scoffing laugh. "Are there many women who do?" he asked. "Turn your head more to the right, it you please—no, you are out of position."

He got up, and, lightly touching her face, moved it as he wished it to be. The slight contact of his fingers sent a thrill through her veins; but he was utterly unmoved, making some commonplace remark to Lady Metherell as he resumed his seat.

During the fourth sitting Lady Metherell was obliged to leave the studio to entertain some friends in the drawing room.

A long silence followed her departure. Vivian West worked on and on without speaking, and Shirley sat motionless until it became almost agony to remain longer in that position.

Then he said, in that quiet, proud way in which he always addressed her— "You can rest now, if you like."

She got up, and, walking to Lady Metherell's table, began examining the satin she was embroidering. "You do not take much interest in your portrait," West said, pausing in his work. "It will soon be finished now."

"I am glad to hear that," she returned. "I am so tired of sitting."

She crossed the room, and, standing behind him, looked at the painting. It was exquisitely done, delicately touched in.

The flesh looked warm and living, the curling hair, with its golden sheen, real; but the expression of the lovely face was not pleasing—it was shallow, vain, sly. "Do you like it?" he asked.

Shirley felt the hot blood rising to her temples. "No," she cried, with a passionate tremor in her voice. "I do not believe I am like that. You have painted what you think me to be."

"I have painted you as I see you," he said, quietly. "I am sorry it does not please you. What is it you object to? Paint is more easily altered than flesh and blood. Shall I make you graver—shall I give you more feeling? A touch, you see, makes the lips firmer; an eyelash or so will give the eyes depth and truth. Are you satisfied now, Miss Lorraine?"

A few dexterous touches had entirely altered the portrait. He stood awaiting her criticism. His light mocking tone wounded her to the quick. She tried to speak, but her throat seemed

to contract and choke her utterance, and, fearing he would notice her agitation, she turned and walked away.

He painted on in silence. Shirley, opening a book, attempted to read, but the words danced before her eyes. She let it fall upon her lap, and glanced towards the tall, slight figure standing before the easel.

The light from the big north window fell on the proud, handsome face, showing the delicate aristocratic features, the sensitive mouth and firm chin; the face of a genius—a man, Shirley thought, whom any girl might worship.

"Then he looked up and met her gaze. 'Are you rested?' he asked. 'I will not keep you much longer.' She stood up, letting the book slip from her lap to the floor."

"I am tired," she said. "I cannot sit for you again this afternoon."

"As you wish," he answered. "On what day would you like to go on with it?" "Cannot you finish without me?"

"I could, but it would be more satisfactory not to do so. However, I will spare you as much as possible. If you will leave that fichu here, Mademoiselle Rozier, I am sure, would sit. She makes a splendid model, and never seems to get tired of it."

Shirley stooped to pick up the book. Her cheeks were flaming with indignation and wounded pride. "That he should have proposed such a thing!"

That he should wish another to sit in her place! She felt that she had never before realised how little he cared for her.

"Thank you," she said, haughtily. "I fancy that arrangement will please you, as well as myself."

He was busy mixing some colour on his palette. "It will suit me very well," he said. She went to the door.

As her fingers touched the handle, she turned and looked at him. His back was to her. Broad-shouldered and neat of limb, he stood there, quite unconscious of her gaze—perhaps unconscious of her presence—

for he started when he found her standing at his elbow. On the sudden impulse of the moment she had gone to him.

Her eyes were dark with unshed tears, her hands were trembling. "Have you not punished me enough?" she cried unsteadily. "Do you ever intend to forgive me?"

"Forgive you!" he repeated slowly. "For what?" Her face was covered with scorching blushes.

"For—for the way in which I treated you," she stammered. "That day you cut me long ago?" he asked, carefully painting on some background. "I assure, Miss Lorraine, I have never thought of it since."

She knew that he was purposely misunderstanding her, and felt that she had been mad, indeed, to attempt to break through his icy reserve.

"I did not mean that," she said in a low shamed voice. "But it—it does not matter."

He went on painting, and for a moment or so, she stood there, mechanically watching his brush. At last she turned to go.

He spoke then, quite quietly and pleasantly, and, as Shirley listened, she felt that her misery had reached its climax, and that she could never suffer more than she did then.

"Perhaps you refer to another time," he said. "One morning, when you chanced to

be taking an early stroll—I was walking with Devitt—we met you in the lane." He paused and refilled his brush with colour. "Is that the occasion?"

"She made a gesture of assent. 'That was in the summer,' he said, breaking another long silence. 'It is autumn now. It did not require a lifetime, Miss Lorraine, for me to awaken from a dream. And, as to forgiveness—what have I to forgive? You are over-sensitive—you have attached too much importance to the affair. You should follow my example, and—forget it.'

She forced her dry lips to move. "I will," she said. "Good-afternoon."

"Good-afternoon, he echoed, and, crossing the room, he opened the door for her. When he had closed it, he returned to his easel, and stood contemplating his work."

"Vain and shallow," he said, at last. "But, thank God! I've the strength to withstand her wiles. She shall never make a fool of me again."

He began slowly pacing the big room, his footstep making no sound on the thick velvet carpet.

Sometimes he paused before his picture, looking at the portrait with a strange expression of mingled admiration and contempt.

After a while he spoke aloud. "What irony of Fate," he said, "to give so faulty a nature so fair a form. Ah! well, it is no concern of mine!"

He began cleaning his brushes, when Cora came in. "Alone!" she said, with her soft foreign accent. "Have you finished for to-day?"

"Miss Lorraine was tired, so we gave it up." "She is talking to Monsieur Gilbert. I felt de trop, and came away. Ah, how like to her it is! You are very clever—you catch just the expression. She is very pretty, is she not?"

"Very," he assented. "Yet you do not seem to like her." "What makes you think so?"

"The way you speak—the way you look. Now you think to yourself, 'The impertinence of the little chit to watch my actions! Ah, Monsieur West, I do watch them! I take a great interest in them.'"

He laughed. "You amuse me, mademoiselle. And why do they interest you?" "I will tell you, but it is to be between you and me."

She seated herself on the edge of a table. He leaned upon the back of a chair, carelessly wondering what she was going to say.

"I have long wished to meet you," she began, flashing her black eyes at him. "Your name forms a link in a chain which I am striving to piece together. You may not be the right man—you comprehend?—but you have the right name. Did you ever know a person called Louisa Jubb?"

He regarded her in grave surprise. "Yes," he said; "I once knew a person of that name."

"Then," Cora cried, excitedly, "you are the Vivian West I want. Will you tell me all you can about yourself?" "There is little to tell, mademoiselle, and it is not interesting."

"You think I am asking too much," she exclaimed. "But, wait one moment."

With quick nervous fingers she drew from her bodice the paper she had so zealously kept there—the contract which Dola Rozier had shown to Martin Metherell, and which her daughter now handed to Vivian West, who, taking it, read it again and again.

Then he looked up at the girl who was anxiously waiting for him to speak. "How came you by this, mademoiselle?" She waved her hands.

"By chance. I had others. They were stolen. Can you tell me what it means?" He shook his head.

"I wish I could; but this—touching the paper—convince me that I am right in an idea I have always had, that my parents, for some reason, desired to rid themselves of me. But I have not the slightest notion who they were."

And then he told her the story of his life. She drank in every word of it, listening with bated breath and her black eyes glued to his expressive face.

"That is all," he said, as he concluded. "It is not a past I care to look back upon, or talk about. In fact, I have only spoken of it to one other besides yourself, and he curiously enough, asked for it."

"Sir Martin Metherell?" Cora said. "Yes; how do you know?"

"Because I notice he takes a great interest in you. He does, does he not?" "One of the kindest, most generous men living," Vivian said, warmly. "I have but to express a wish, and he is anxious to fulfil it. His goodness to me is extraordinary, since I am a complete stranger to him. I am curious about this paper, mademoiselle. Will you not tell me how it came to be in your possession?"

"You would be no wiser if I did," she answered. "I tell you it came to me by chance. There were others; but they were stolen."

"And the thief—?" "Ah, monsieur, could I tell you the thief, I could disclose to you a great deal! I have my suspicions. Some day I may prove they are true. This Louisa Jubb, is she still living?"

"She died many years ago." "And the witness—this Fieldwick?" "I do not remember the name."

Cora sat with her brows drawn together. After a while, she had learnt but little. Vivian West was, apparently, unable to help her in any way.

"You will speak of this to one one?" she said, at length. "It is my secret, and I have trusted you with it. Some time ago a cruel, cowardly deed was done here in this very house. In my own heart I know the base devil who did it; but I must hold proofs before I dare speak. When that day comes, Monsieur West, the mystery of your life may also be cleared away."

In her excitement she had risen and gripped him by the arm. Her black eyes were blazing, her red lips parted.

Then suddenly her fingers relaxed their hold, the fire died from her glance. With a swift, gliding movement she had placed some yards between them.

The next instant he saw the cause of this sudden change. Sir Metherell had entered the room.

He looked from one to the other, with a guilty suspicious glance; but the evident pleasure with which the young man turned to meet him, subdued the dread he had experienced on finding them alone together.

"You here, Mademoiselle Rozier?" he said. "I imagined the ladies were in the drawing-room."

"I came to look at the portrait, Sir Martin," Cora replied. "That is what I have come to see," Metherell said. "How are you progressing, West?"

Vivian lifted the cloth he had drawn over the painting. Sir Martin stood before it, in silence. At last he turned to the artist.

"That is no picture," he said, with a ring of pride in his voice. "It is Shirley Lorraine, her living self. You are a genius—your talent is marvellous. I have seen nothing like it."

For a moment he had forgotten Cora. His hand was resting familiarly on Vivian's shoulder.

His drawn, haggard face was flushed with pleasure, till, with a start, he became aware of the watchful gaze which never seemed to leave him.

In Cora Rozier's presence he had always been careful to show no great friendliness towards Vivian West. Those fathomless eyes of hers seemed to read his every thought and action.

For her he felt a horror and repugnance beyond all expression. She seemed to him scarcely human. At times, he almost believed her to be the spirit of Dola Rozier, returned to curse the remainder of his life.

"I am glad you are pleased," Vivian West said. "It is almost finished now."

"I am more than pleased," Sir Martin said, but he spoke now without enthusiasm. "Show my picture," Cora interposed. "Sir Martin has not seen that."

There was an evil smile on her lips, as she led the way to an easel standing in a corner of the room, and flinging back the covering, eagerly scanned Sir Martin's face.

The colour drained away from it. The head had been roughly touched in. The dark eyes were looking from the canvas with a strange intentness.

The shoulders were shrouded in white drapery; but, just above the heart was a dull, red stain, as if some awful wound was there.

Metherell's brain seemed to reel beneath the sudden shock. It was Dola, stabbed to the heart!

He groped blindly for a chair, and sank upon it. The sickening horror of the whole scene was rushing upon him.

He saw himself again swiftly ascending the stairs, creeping into her room, and driving the dagger home.

He recalled the frenzy of hatred and despair which had possessed him, and the hopeless remorse that followed.

Someone was speaking to him, but the voice sounded far away.

Then, with a great effort, he struggled back to the present. Cora was no longer in the room.

Vivian West was putting his painting paraphernalia away, and apparently unaware of what had taken place, for he was talking quite unconcernedly of something of something which had occurred on the previous evening.

As they descended the stairs together, Sir Martin said, in an odd, strained voice: "What induced you to paint that ghastly thing?"

"You don't like it?" "I—I did not understand it," the elder man replied. "I don't care for gruesome subjects."

Vivian West looked puzzled. "You can scarcely call Mademoiselle Rozier gruesome," he expostulated. "Of course the painting is only just commenced."

Sir Martin said no more, but, that evening, he stole upstairs to the studio. As he pushed the door open, he paused in horror at what he saw.

The startling spectacle that was presented to Sir Martin Metherell's eyes as he pushed open the door of the studio, was Cora, with a candle in her hand, kneeling before her own portrait.

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She turned and saw him before he had time to draw back, and, rising to her feet, stood with the light held above her head.

"Ah, monsieur! have you come to take another look at this? You did not seem to approve of it this afternoon. It looked like blood, did it not? Ha, ha! I put it there when Monsieur West was not looking. I seized his brush, and dabbed it so. One could imagine that a dagger—such a dagger as is missing from the hall—had made that mark. Did it remind you of a real murder, Sir Martin Metherell?"

She had come quite close to him. Her eyes glittered wickedly in the flickering candle-light.

He tried to speak, but his dry lips refused to utter any sound. She laughed—a shrill, scornful, triumphant laugh.

"You look afraid," she cried; "afraid of poor little me! You are beginning to find that I have watched and waited to some purpose—that the secret you thought so carefully buried is slowly, but surely, leaking out. That soon I shall hold, in my two hands, you and your fate."

It was then that, with an awful effort, he pulled himself together. "It is possible that mademoiselle is mistaken," he said. "She, perhaps, forgets that suspicion is one thing—proof, another."

Cora Rozier did not forget it; but she was beginning to see that to obtain proof was rather beyond her power, and, that very afternoon, had determined to make the best bargain she could, by frightening Sir Martin into agreeing to what she wished.

"Mademoiselle Rozier," she said, grandly, "is too clever to make so absurd a blunder. My friend, I have—proof! You start—you are surprised."

She lowered the light, so that it shone full on his face. With a quick gesture he snatched it from her hand, and placed it on the table.

He felt that a supreme moment had arrived, and that he must fight well or lose all. "You speak in enigmas," she said, quietly. "Proof! Proof of what?"

She was white as a sheet, her lips were drawn back from her teeth. "There was something awful in the concentrated malevolence of her expression."

"Of a life's deception," she hissed. "Oh vile treachery, and—murder! You think I know nothing. I know all—all—all!"

She struck her hands together, and shook them in his face. He caught her wrists, and held them in a vice.

"You are mad," he cried; "I will have you shut up in a lunatic asylum, and there in safety, you can shriek out your infamous charges."

She laughed derisively. "You are too deeply in my power for me to fear you."

He began to see it was a losing game, yet he would not give in. "Utter one more word," he said sternly, "and I will give you in charge as a lunatic or, worse still, a blackmailer."

With one hand he held her wrists together, with the other he stretched out and reached the bell.

For an instant or so they remained looking at one another. Then a slow triumphant smile illumined her features.

"Vivian West," she said. His arms fell helplessly to his sides, a bluish shade came about his mouth, and he staggered back against the wall.

"Vivian West!" she repeated, mercilessly, "your son—the secret sin of your life—the child whom you tried to rid yourself of. Ah, my friend, when you stole the papers from my room that first night I slept here, you little knew you dropped one—an important one—which made your secret mine! I have kept it, but I have not been idle. What have you to say now?"

He made no answer, but paced the room with nervous, faltering steps. His sin had found him out. The end had come at last—the end he had so dreaded—so striven to ward off.

And the girl who had tracked him down stood and watched—her breath coming and going quickly, a bright color dyeing the pallor of her face.

She had succeeded—succeeded beyond her expectations. Every shot had told. She had risked all in this sudden attack, and she had won.

"What have you to say now?" she said again. And, turning, he answered her in the dull, calm way of one who had fought and lost.

"Nothing, mademoiselle." "But that will not suit me," she declared. "I have found you out. I have tracked you down. I have but to speak, and you are—where?"

She spread out her hands, and shrugged her shoulders. "I am at your mercy," he said bitterly. "That is true," she agreed, "completely at my mercy. Still I have a proposal to make to you. If you accept it, your secret will be safe."

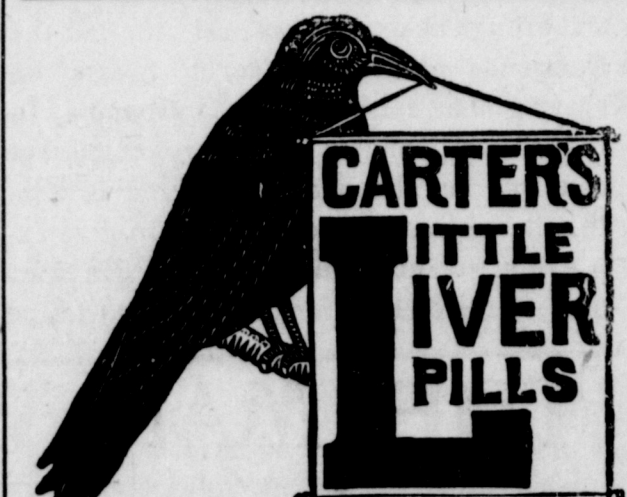
He looked at her, as if not believing the evidence of his ears. He had never doubted that any motive but one of revenge had urged her to discover her mother's murderer.

That it might be possible to buy her silence had not occurred to him. He felt like one who has suddenly received a reprieve from death.

"What is it?" he gasped, hoarsely. "For Heaven's sake, don't keep me in suspense!" All his life Martin Metherell had been a moral coward, ever weak enough to sin, but lacking the strength to face the consequences.

Cora, with her keen insight into character, saw this, and determined to profit by it. And he faced her and defied her. He would have quickly discovered how little she really knew, and how powerless she was to harm him.

She had cleverly put two and two together, but it was all guess-work. Continued on Fifteenth Page.



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