

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED.

Sitting by the open window, with a cool, evening breeze just stirring the loose hair upon her forehead, she let her thoughts wander through her acquaintance with him, from the first meeting in the churchyard on the hill to the parting in the snow storm, nearly nine months ago.

He had loved her once, but he never would again, she was quite sure of that. He thought her weak and worthless, one to be despised.

Well, she had only herself to thank.

Had she been true to him, in the days of his poverty and obscurity, what joy might not have been hers; but she had hesitated, she had been a coward, afraid of the opinion of others, and all her happiness had slipped away, leaving her—what?

Poor Shirley! Her own loneliness rose up and overwhelmed her with a sense of desolation.

The tears crowded to her eyes, but the next minute she had brushed them away. Then the dressing-gong sounded, and a maid servant came in with hot water, and a tray of exquisite bathhouse flowers for her to choose from.

She was the last to appear in the drawing-room that evening.

Sir Henry met her with an elaborate bow. "My dear Shirley, a thousand thanks for this condescension. It is, indeed, an honour to have you under my humble roof."

Fortunately, at that moment the butler announced that dinner was served, and Shirley was spared more of his sarcasm.

Mr. Ridley took her into dinner, and only when seated at the long table did she dare to glance round for Vivian West.

It was to her relief that she found he was sitting on the opposite side, some way down.

A tall vase of flowers stood between them so that she could only catch a glimpse of him; but now and again, she caught the sound of his laugh, which always struck her as such a pleasant one.

Harold Ridley had recovered his ordinary outward composure, but was very quiet, and Shirley had no inclination to talk, so that, save for a few common-place remarks, they ate their dinner in comparative silence—a silence which passed unnoticed amidst the general lively chatter that went on until the ladies retired to the drawing-room, when Lady Gildare once again pounced upon Shirley.

"Sit here, there's a dear child, and amuse me. I do so adore to be amused. Being such an invalid, time hangs heavily upon my poor little hands," extending her heavily ringed white fingers. "Now tell me, what do you think of the lion of the season, this Vivian West? Such a romantic name, such a charming man. But his pictures—well, my dear child, entre nous, I don't think much of them. I saw one at an exhibition—a dreary, flat marsh, all dull greys and greens, not a bit of decent colour, and a drab of a woman hanging on to a gate. Dear, dear! English people go crazy over such queer things. That is a pretty frock you are wearing; it suits you."

And so on, and so on, till Shirley wondered if the soft, sighing voice would ever cease.

Then at last her heart gave a great bound, for the men had left their wine and cigars, and were coming into the drawing-room; but Vivian West was not among them.

"Henry never can tear himself away from the dinner-table," Lady Gildare declared, waving her huge feather fan to and fro. "It is a great mistake. I wonder dear Madge allows it; but then, of course, he rules, not she—a pretty creature, but no backbone."

Shirley was about to make some indignant rejoinder, when someone came between her and the brilliantly-lighted room, and, looking up, she found Vivian West standing before her.

He and one or two others had come in by another entrance, unperceived by her. "How do you do, Miss Lorraine?" he said. "I think your sister wishes to speak to speak to you."

Without a word she took the arm he offered, and crossed the room with him to where Madge was making the centre of a lively group.

She just nodded and smiled at Shirley, and continued her conversation.

"Madge does not want me, after all," Shirley said, striving to keep her voice steady.

"She does not appear to," he assented. "I think Lady Ayerst imagined you were being victimised, for she sent me to rescue you. Have I done right?"

"I was just wondering how I could escape," she replied, with a nervous laugh. "Lady Gildare is rather monotonous."

"Indeed!"

He showed just sufficient interest for politeness. Shirley felt as if an icy wind were freezing her.

"Do not let me keep you," she said. "I will sit here."

It was a chair by an open window; outside, the garden lay bathed in moonlight. Not a leaf stirred.

The air was heavy with the scent of the syringas.

He stood beside her, looking with all an artist's pleasure at the scene before him.

"What a night!" he said, half to himself. "What peace!" Then, in an altered tone: "Rather different, is it not, from the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you?"

Th quiet, matter-of-fact way in which he alluded to the day out her to the quick. To her it had been fraught with bitterest

anguish; to him it had been nothing but a chance meeting, a parting of no account. Her throat and lips felt dry.

"I do not remember when that was," she said.

"No?" There was neither surprise nor vexation in his tone. "I, too, had forgotten it until this moment. Meeting you, probably, recalled it to my mind. Let me try to bring it to yours. You were on the beach at Coddington; it was snowing fast, the wind was blowing half a gale. I helped you to reach a cottage. We had tea there. Surely you have not forgotten those cups. I recollect it was the day before I went up to town. Do you not remember?"

Did she not remember every trivial detail of that afternoon?

While he talked, it all stood out like a living picture before her mind's eyes.

A great choking sob rose in her throat, and, hastily rising, she muttered some incoherent excuse, and, stepping through the window, turned down the first path she came to.

He hesitated for an instant, then followed.

"Are you not afraid of taking cold?" Can I not fetch you a cloak?"

"Thank you," she said, in an old, strangled little voice, "if you will be so kind."

Directly he had gone, she turned and fled—anywhere, anywhere to be alone.

She found her way to a tiny arbor, covered with roses and honeysuckle.

It was almost dark within.

She would hide there for a time.

With something like a sigh of relief she entered, and sank upon the bench.

As she did so, someone moved, and, rising, stood before her—a slender, black form—in the dim light.

The apparition was so unexpected that Shirley uttered an exclamation of surprise; but, almost as she did so, she recognised Nurse Patience.

"I fear I have startled you," the woman said, in her soft, sweet voice. "I was sitting here, resting. I did not think anyone else would be likely to come to such a lonely spot."

"I came here to hide," Shirley answered. "But don't let me disturb you."

"It is time I returned to the house. Good-evening."

She was stepping into the moonlight, when Shirley said—

"If you meet Mr. West—Mr. Vivian West—don't say you have seen me."

"Mr.—whom?"

Nurse Patience was not wearing the disfiguring glasses now.

A pair of large, sad dark eyes tried to pierce the gloom where Shirley was sitting.

"Mr. Vivian West, I—what is the matter?"

"Are you ill?"

Lady Gildare's nurse had put out her hand, and was clinging unsteadily to the door post of the summer house.

Shirley drew her to the bench.

She felt she was trembling in every limb.

"It is nothing—a slight faintness—it will pass away in a moment."

"Can I fetch you anything?"

Shirley was holding the nervous fluttering fingers in her firm young clasp.

"You are very kind. There is nothing, thank you. It is passing away now."

She sat up.

A gleam of moonlight just touched her face; it was utterly colorless, but Shirley looked at it, fascinated.

It seemed to her that she had never seen such a striking face before.

Lady Gildare had spoken truly when she called the great eyes tragic, and yet they were like other eyes—other eyes that Shirley had seen—eyes whose every expression was treasured in her memory.

She knew now why she had felt so drawn to Nurse Patience; it was because, in some strange way, she resembled Vivian West.

There were the same delicate aristocratic features, the same firm sad mouth, even the carriage of the small proud head was almost identical.

Only, on her face was a divine expression of resignation, and in her eyes the shadow of some great sorrow; while from

his there flashed forth life and energy, and a clear, keen intelligence.

"You are like, so very like, someone I know," Shirley said, as the elder woman, turning suddenly, met the intense gaze.

She smiled.

"Am I?"

"I could not at first think who you reminded me of. The glasses alter you; but, without them, you are curiously like Mr. West. Is it possible you are related to him?"

"No, it is not. I have no relations, no one belonging to me in the whole world. Yet, strange to say, the name of Vivian West brings to me a flood of painful memory."

"The name is not common."

"No."

"It is just a coincidence, I suppose; but it is odd to meet two people of exactly the same name."

"Yes. But the one I knew died many, many years ago."

She rose with a sudden movement, and the next instant Shirley was alone, with only the echo of that tense, passion-laden voice ringing in her ears.

CHAPTER XVIII.

For all his wealth and influence, Sir Henry Ayerst was not a popular man.

He was too given to saying and doing disagreeable things; besides which, most men, with the exception of a certain fast, hard-drinking set, looked upon him with contempt, for Sir Henry possessed no code of honour, and was destitute of morals.

Yet, though he had but few friends, he possessed a large circle of acquaintances, knowing everyone who was worth knowing, and a great many who were not.

And, because he spent money freely, and knew how to entertain, his invitations were always readily accepted.

He was a man who hated home life, who had no fine sentiments, and who looked upon his wife with no higher regard than he bestowed upon a new horse.

Her beauty pleased him, and the sensation her presence usually created flattered his vanity.

At first she had been to him a novelty, a new acquisition, and it had amused him to dance attendance upon her; but already he had tired of that, and more than once Madge had seen the ugly side of his character.

The coarseness and brutality of it had chilled her with horror; but she bore it with a smiling face.

She had sold herself for wealth and position.

She had not married Sir Henry for love. Love was not necessary to happiness, so she thought, and, so far, she had not felt the want of it; but, though she knew it not, the time when she would feel it was close at hand.

The day following Shirley's arrival at Royal Heath, Lady Ayerst sat in her boudoir writing letters.

She had just finished her correspondence, when Sir Henry came in.

He had been riding, and was hot.

He drew out a silk handkerchief, and began wiping his red face.

"Met young Metherell," he said, "and have asked him to come over for a week or so, and bring the bride elect."

"My dear Henry," Madge exclaimed, "I trust you have not invited Mademoiselle Rozier! I simply decline to entertain her."

"Bosh! She is all right. She will be Lady Metherell in another month or so. You cannot refuse to know her."

"Perhaps not, in a way; but there is no necessity for her to stay in the house. Besides, did you remember that Shirley is here?"

He burst out laughing.

"The very reason, my dear, why I asked them. I want to see how Miss Shirley will act. That little Frenchwoman will rub it into her, or I'm much mistaken."

A slight sneer flitted across Madge's face.

"I do not fancy that anything she can say will affect Shirley; but I do think that this invitation is given in the worst possible taste. I shall write to Gilbert Metherell, and ask him to postpone his visit."

"You will do nothing of the kind," Sir Henry declared, in a way which showed he did not mean to be trifled with. "It will be as well for you to remember that this house is mine, and that I invite whom I please."

She wiped her pen, and placed it on the silver stand.

"And when," she asked, slowly rising, "am I to expect your friends?"

"They'll come over to-morrow in time for lunch, my Lady Disdain. I'll be hanged if West shan't paint you like that!"

She gathered her letters together, and left the room, without a word.

His mocking laugh followed her as she closed the door.

On the staircase she met Shirley, and stopped her.

"Gilbert Metherell is coming to-morrow," she said. "Henry has thoughtlessly invited him. I hope you will not mind."

Shirley made a little grimace.

"What a nuisance! Still, I must meet him sooner or later. Is the fair Cora coming also?"

"Yes. It is horribly annoying. I am very vexed. Fancy having to entertain an underbred little creature like that!"

"We may find her most charming," Shirley returned, and went on her way.

Next morning, shortly before lunch, the visitors came.

Shirley chanced to be standing in the hall when they arrived, and so was the first to meet them.

She went forward at once and shook hands.

"It is a long time since we met," she said. The deuce of a time," Metherell responded, rather awkwardly.

"You have been absent, have you not?" Cora said, condescendingly. "Are we to see Lady Ayerst?"

"I believe so," Shirley replied, leading the way to the drawing-room. "If you will sit down, I will see that she is acquainted with the fact that you are here."

"There is no hurry," Gilbert said. "I say, don't run away."

But Shirley had departed.

He turned crossly to Cora.

"You are beastly disagreeable this morning," he said.

"My dear Gilbert, of you I was thinking the same. You are like one great cross bear. Do you want Miss Lorraine to flatter herself you are still pining for her?"

"I'll jolly well soon show her I'm not," he declared. "She isn't half so pretty as she used to be—gone off horribly."

Then Madge came in, and welcomed her guests with perfect courtesy, but with a coldness towards Mademoiselle Rozier which ought to have frozen that young lady had she been less hardy than she was.

But Cora was not a sensitive person, and she did not care two straws whether Lady Ayerst liked her or not, so long as she was invited to Royal Heath, and mixed with the upper ten.

She had grown very grand of late, talked in a lofty manner to her superiors, and was insolent to those she considered her inferiors.

No one liked her, and her advent at Royal Heath was regretted by nearly everyone.

She was shunned by the women, and, in return, took a malicious pleasure in vexing them in every way that lay in her power.

She carried off the men they wished to talk to, and spoilt many a pleasant flirtation.

She discovered small secrets, and made them public property.

In fact, before she had been in the house three days nearly everyone hated her.

If there was one person Cora disliked more than another, it was Shirley—Shirley who treated her with a sublime indifference, which annoyed her more than anything else could have done.

She had always been jealous of her, jealous of her appearance and that indescribable air of good breeding which she—Cora—did not possess, although she was always striving to acquire it.

If she could have hurt her, she would have done so willingly; she had tried to do so more than once; but each attempt had failed, and Shirley had gone on her way serene and smiling, as if no such person as Cora Rozier existed.

But, all the same, Shirley's life just then was not exactly a bed of roses, though she bravely concealed the fact from everyone and was universally declared the life of the party.

None guessed how forced the gay laugh was at times, or how bitter and painful were the thoughts which ran beneath her merry nonsense.

It was pride and wounded vanity which gave her the strength to keep it up in the way she did, for a few words dropped by Cora had filled her with terror lest others, lest Vivian West himself, might guess her secret.

She had been coming from the house one day with her racket, intending to have a game of tennis, when Cora joined her.

"Don't go that way," she cried, taking Shirley by the arm, and drawing her in the other direction. "You will spoil so charming a scene, if you do. Miss Cora is sitting gazing down at Monsieur West, who is lying on the grass, gazing up."

"Well, he has something very nice to look at," Shirley calmly replied. "I think Louise Cora is lovely."

"He evidently thinks so, too." The dark eyes were scanning Shirley's face. "But he is fickle, is Monsieur West. I have been told that he admired you."

"Really?"

"People say such odd things, do they not? I was told that you were in love with him still."

"Yes?"

"You do not seem to mind. I should not like to have it said of me."

Shirley smiled.

"I should have enough to do if I paid attention to the vulgar scandal of others," she said.

It was such encounters as these which intensified Cora's vindictive hatred for Shirley.

"English pig!" she would hiss through her clenched teeth. "I will humble her some day. Wait till she has a lover. My time will be then."

And the dark brows could go up, and the black eyes gleam, in anticipation of that day of revenge.

Shirley Lorraine received her full share of attention from the men; but there was one who paid her rather more than the others, Sir William Bingham, a rich, middle-aged baronet.

From those terrible side aches, back aches, head-aches and the thousand and one other ills which make life full of misery.

Most of these troubles are due to impure, imperfectly filtered blood—the kidneys are not acting right and in consequence the system is being poisoned with impurities.

DOAN'S KIDNEY PILLS

are daily proving themselves woman's greatest friend and benefactor.

Here is an instance:

Mrs. Harry Fleming, St. Mary's, N.B., says: "The use of Doan's Kidney Pills restored me to complete health. The first symptoms I noticed in my case were severe pains in the small of my back and around the loins, together with general weakness and loss of appetite."

I gradually became worse, until, hearing of Doan's Kidney Pills, I got a box from our druggist.

I am pleased to testify to their effectiveness in correcting the troubles from which I suffered.

DOAN'S KIDNEY PILLS

are daily proving themselves woman's greatest friend and benefactor.

Here is an instance:

Mrs. Harry Fleming, St. Mary's, N.B., says: "The use of Doan's Kidney Pills restored me to complete health. The first symptoms I noticed in my case were severe pains in the small of my back and around the loins, together with general weakness and loss of appetite."

I gradually became worse, until, hearing of Doan's Kidney Pills, I got a box from our druggist.

I am pleased to testify to their effectiveness in correcting the troubles from which I suffered.

DOAN'S KIDNEY PILLS

are daily proving themselves woman's greatest friend and benefactor.

Here is an instance:

Mrs. Harry Fleming, St. Mary's, N.B., says: "The use of Doan's Kidney Pills restored me to complete health. The first symptoms I noticed in my case were severe pains in the small of my back and around the loins, together with general weakness and loss of appetite."

I gradually became worse, until, hearing of Doan's Kidney Pills, I got a box from our druggist.

I am pleased to testify to their effectiveness in correcting the troubles from which I suffered.

DOAN'S KIDNEY PILLS

are daily proving themselves woman's greatest friend and benefactor.

Here is an instance:

Mrs. Harry Fleming, St. Mary's, N.B., says: "The use of Doan's Kidney Pills restored me to complete health. The first symptoms I noticed in my case were severe pains in the small of my back and around the loins, together with general weakness and loss of appetite."

I gradually became worse, until, hearing of Doan's Kidney Pills, I got a box from our druggist.

I am pleased to testify to their effectiveness in correcting the troubles from which I suffered.

DOAN'S KIDNEY PILLS

are daily proving themselves woman's greatest friend and benefactor.

Here is an instance:

Mrs. Harry Fleming, St. Mary's, N.B., says: "The use of Doan's Kidney Pills restored me to complete health. The first symptoms I noticed in my case were severe pains in the small of my back and around the loins, together with general weakness and loss of appetite."

I gradually became worse, until, hearing of Doan's Kidney Pills, I got a box from our druggist.

I am pleased to testify to their effectiveness in correcting the troubles from which I suffered.

Madge looked on and smiled, watching his admiration grow to adoration.

But Shirley never noticed it until, one bright summer's afternoon, he laid his heart's title and his wealth at her feet.

She had started for a solitary ramble, and he had overtaken her, much to her annoyance, for she wanted to be alone.

"I caught sight of you from the smoke-room window," he said, rather breathlessly.

"I saw which way you were coming, and took a short cut through the plantation. I hope you do not object to my presence."

Shirley told a polite fib, and said she did not.

She also said she was going for a long walk: she was afraid Sir William would find it too long on such a hot afternoon; he had better come a little way, and then turn back.

"It will depend upon you," he said, "as to how far I come."

She looked at him, not understanding what he meant.

And then he told her what, for the last week, he had been making up his mind to say.

He admired her more than anyone else. He wanted her for his wife