

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED.

He led a very quiet, secluded life. Some great disappointment had turned him against the world, and I, a poor little waif, was the first stranger who had crossed his threshold for many years. He was a queer, gruff old man; but, somehow, I never felt afraid of him, and we soon became fast friends.

He taught me very nearly all I know. He discovered my one talent, and did all he could to bring it forward. When I was eighteen, he sent me to Paris, to study, and while I was there he died.

I expected naught from his death, knowing he possessed nothing but an annuity. However, I found he had saved a few hundred dollars, which was left to me. I think the last act of kindness touched me more than all.

Vivian West's voice had grown slightly husky, and a mist blurred his vision. He leaned upon the gate-post, and gazed meditatively down the country road.

For a few moments Sir Martin also remained silent, and his Maker alone conscious of the thoughts throbbing through his brain.

At last he laid a trembling hand upon the young man's arm, rousing him from his reverie.

"In future let me be your friend. Your story has but added to the interest I felt in you. Your life has been a sad one. I would like to make the rest of it very different. You remind me of one I knew long ago—one to whom I did an injury. For the sake of that person—for my own sake—let me help you towards the goal you are trying to reach."

"You are very good," Vivian West said, surprised at Sir Martin's strange emotion. And, before he could say more, the baronet had wrung his hand, and wished him "Good-evening."

Sir Martin walked quickly for some distance, then suddenly his speed slackened.

"My own son!" he cried, brokenly. "Would to Heaven I dared claim him as such!"

It was strange how he felt drawn to this son of his; strange how deep an affection had sprung to life at the meeting with him.

He felt thankful and relieved that he had spoken to him, that he had at last made a step in the right direction.

All these years he had longed to be able to make some reparation for his sin, and now at length it had been granted him.

His step became more elastic, his shoulders lost something of their weary stoop, a new interest had come into his life, and, for the time at least, he lost sight of the gruesome horror which was ever with him.

Cora Rozier, from behind her window-curtain, watched him come up the drive.

"Ah, my friend!" she muttered, softly, "the day will come when your secret shall be mine. You are clever and cunning, but so also am I. You fear me already; your eyes shrink from mine. All the while, you think, 'She knows—why does she not speak?' Ha, ha, monsieur! you will learn in time. When I have fathomed the mystery, then I will speak, and to some purpose."

Unfastening the bodice of her dress, she drew out a folded piece of paper, and opening it carefully, read it through.

It was the same agreement, a copy of which Dola Rozier had shown Sir Martin by the old mill.

"Vivian West?" Cora said, aloud, her dark brows drawn together. "What can he be to Sir Martin Metherell? If I can only trace this Louise Jubb, I shall know all. This is the key to the mystery. Ah, Sir Martin! little do you dream that when you stole the papers, you dropped this one precious document."

She turned it to its hiding-place, her red lips curving in an exultant smile.

Cora Rozier was a born adventuress, utterly heartless and unprincipled.

Most of her life had been spent amongst a gang of particularly clever high-class thieves, who led a life of reckless gaiety and daring escapades, which electrified the gay world of Paris and entirely baffled the French police.

But, clever as they were, they had lately had things rather too hot for them, and had for the time dispersed, so that Mademoiselle Rozier's present occupation suited her uncommonly well.

Quick-sighted and keen-witted, it had for the time to discover that Sir Martin's calm exposure was feigned, and from the first she had believed him guilty of her mother's death.

She was aware that her mother had come to England for the purpose of black-mailing some person of position.

Her instructions had been, Keep quiet till I send for you.

The summons had never come, and death had sealed her lips for ever, but she had left one even more cunning and unscrupulous than herself to avenge her murder.

Gilbert, coming upon the terrace, glanced at Cora's window.

They had met the day before, and he had rather taken by her bright, piquant manner, and, feeling a little bored this evening, he wished she would come and amuse him.

Cora, from behind the curtain saw the glance and shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah, but you are ugly!" she remarked with great disdain. "Still you may be worth cultivating. Let me see if I can make you my adorer."

She twisted her black hair into a more becoming style, twined some lace about her head and shoulders, and ran down to meet Gilbert Metherell.

"Ah, monsieur!" she exclaimed, as if surprised. "But you startled me. Is not the evening superb?"

"I was just wishing you would come out," he declared. "I was finding my own society beastly slow."

"Beastly slow!" she repeated, with such a droll accent that he burst out laughing. "I should think you had found so, too," he said. "I say let us agree to cheer one another while you are here."

"It may be but for one little day more," with an expressive sigh.

"Nonsense!" he returned. "Now I have come home, you are going to stay. I am certain we shall be capital friends."

"I invited myself," she said, raising her dark eyes to his. "I cannot ask again. To-morrow, I hear, Lady Metherell is coming home. She may not like me being here."

"Of course she will like it," he answered. "She was questioning me about you to-day. I told her you had eyes like—great Scott! what are your eyes like? They are the finest I have ever seen."

It was true that Lady Metherell had been making inquiries as to what manner of girl Mademoiselle Rozier's daughter was.

Since her accident, she had spent many an hour thinking of the Frenchwoman whose sudden and terrible death had so completely altered her husband.

Since that morning, when she had asked him to explain his strange acquaintance with Mademoiselle Rozier, she had never mentioned her name; but she had brooded over it.

For the first time in her life she was jealous—jealous of the unknown past in which she vainly groped, striving to grasp something tangible.

She knew that he had married her for money, and had always thought it more than probable that at one time he had been in love with some girl; in fact, she had heard rumors that there had been something between him and a pretty governess, who was living with his step-mother at the time he became engaged to herself.

It was quite possible that Mademoiselle Rozier had been the governess; but in Lady Metherell's eyes, it was not possible that he could have entertained for her, all these years, a love so strong and passionate that her death could make him what he had lately become.

She felt there was some other reason for it; some deadly secret which he never intended to divulge, but which, nevertheless she determined to find out.

She was keenly anxious to meet Cora Rozier, who had so unexpectedly appeared upon the scene, and on the evening of the day on which she returned to Metherell Court she sent for the girl.

Cora entered the apartment with downcast eyes.

"Madame desires to see me?" she said, timidly.

"I am anxious to make your acquaintance," Lady Metherell said, pleasantly. "Though I deeply regret the sad circumstances which have brought you here."

"Ah, madame, it is terrible! You know my poor mother?"

"But slightly. Sir Martin had met her many years before. Perhaps you know him?"

"No, madame—our acquaintance begins from the night I arrived here."

"But by name, of course—Madame Rozier no doubt, often mentioned his name?"

Cora Rozier looked up with an odd little smile.

Lady Metherell was sounding her she knew.

"I do not remember her doing so," she said.

There was a short silence.

Then the elder woman began again—

"I understand you are quite alone in the world?"

"Oui, madame."

"Have you any plans for the future?"

Cora made an expressive gesture of helplessness.

"The shock was so sudden—I was bewildered. I begged to remain here a while; but I encroach no longer."

"I trust," Lady Metherell said, "that you will remain with us until you quite settle on what you wish to do. We are but a dull party here. Still I do not suppose you feel inclined for gaiety at present."

"Madame is very good," Cora cried, warmly. "I love the peace of this beautiful place. The thought of leaving so soon had rendered me very sad."

She had had no intention of leaving, but had not expected to gain her desire quite so easily.

An invitation for an unlimited time was the very thing she wanted.

She went up to her room and laughed aloud.

"What a fool she is!" she cried. "Dieu, what a fool! Is it possible she knows nothing? Ah, well, I shall soon find out!"

Sir Martin, coming into the drawing-room, found his wife lying on the sofa.

He was intensely glad to have her back—the loneliness had been awful.

He drew a chair near the couch.

"I have missed you terribly," he said.

"You had Mademoiselle Rozier to keep you company," she replied.

The shadow on his face deepened.

"She had her rooms," he said. "I have scarcely seen her."

"My dear Martin," she exclaimed, in languid surprise, "your behaviour is so extra-

ordinary! The daughter of an old friend comes to you, and you leave her to entertain herself."

"How could I entertain a girl like that?" he expostulated. "As you were absent, the arrangement did not strike me as peculiar."

"To me it appears decidedly so," she responded, watching him through her light eye-lashes. "Madame Rozier was treated as an honoured guest—I may say, forced into my house, since you insisted upon her remaining against my wishes; but, when the daughter comes, she is treated like a lady's maid, or governess, and—"

"My dear Clara," he interrupted, hastily rising, "the whole subject is painful to me. I beg you will not speak of it again. I made Mademoiselle Rozier as welcome as I could under the circumstances. I understand, from Gilbert, she is leaving to-morrow."

The thought of her departure had been such an immense relief that his wife's next words fairly staggered him.

"I have asked her to remain."

"You—you have asked her! When?—why?"

"My dear Martin," Lady Metherell exclaimed, with a slight, unpleasant laugh, "you are really growing quite tragic. Is there any reason why I should not have invited Mademoiselle Rozier to stay here?"

He had recovered his equanimity.

"No reason that I know of," he replied, "except that she is young and good-looking and Gilbert, as you know, is susceptible."

"You forget he is engaged, and very much in love. He may flirt with this little French girl to pass the time; but—"

"Great Heavens! I trust there will be none of the folly!" Sir Martin ejaculated. "Those flirtations too often form an entailment which lasts a man his lifetime."

"Patience—I shall learn the truth in time," Lady Metherell said to herself, as the husband quitted the room.

She had no notion as to how very near she had been to learning it that evening.

For, as Sir Martin had stood beside her, there had come upon him a great longing to tell her all, to bide nothing from her, to kneel by her couch and crave her forgiveness and her help.

The burden of his secret was heavier than he could bear, and one gentle look, one kindly word spoken at that moment, would have won it from him; but he had been met with a half-contemptuous coldness, which had frozen him to silence.

He felt there was no pity, no sympathy, to be won from her, so he left her, and fought out the bitterness alone.

Her words had raised the old aching, despairing memories which his meeting with Vivian West had for the time lulled.

He went out into the quiet, moon lit evenings and seeking his favourite and most sequestered part of the grounds, paced the level path from end to end.

A host of ghastly recollections had driven forth all pleasant thought; added to which was the harassing knowledge that, for some time to come, he would have to meet and converse daily with Cora Rozier.

Hitherto he had managed to avoid her, meeting her but rarely, and then only spending but a few moments in her society.

He feared her.

Her dark, watchful eyes struck terror to his very soul.

He felt that she knew the ghastly secret of his life.

After that first night she had never again spoken directly of the murder, neither had she mentioned the theft of the papers.

It was her strange silence which made him feel that in her he had a deadly enemy.

As he walked to and fro, sometimes muttering aloud, sometimes clenching teeth and hands in an agony of remorse, there grew upon him the uncomfortable sensation that he was not alone.

He looked from right to left, peering into the shadows, then stood and listened—all was quite still.

He moved on again; but the feeling that he was being watched kept with him.

It became unbearable at length, and he returned to the house.

As he reached the steps leading to the terrace, he looked back.

The beautiful gardens lay bathed in moonlight, and, as he looked, a figure came from a belt of trees, and ran across the lawn as if intending to reach the house from another direction.

He was determined to know who it was, and, keeping well in the shade, hastily made his way to another entrance, and waited.

A minute or so later, a small, slim figure came swiftly over the grass.

It was Cora Rozier.

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She was passing him, when she became aware of his presence.

"Ah, monsieur!" she said, with a scarcely perceptible start, "is it you?"

"You have been enjoying a lonely stroll," he said.

"And you also," she replied.

"I am not mistaken, mademoiselle, you were in the yew walk a short time ago. Were you hiding?"

"Hiding! What reason should I hide for?"

"That is what I cannot understand. You were there, you saw me there, yet you kept silent."

"Monsieur was wrapped in thought. I did not like to disturb him. Monsieur walked with his hands like this—clenching her own small hands—and sometimes he said, aloud, 'My God!—my God!' I felt monsieur's thoughts must, indeed, be terrible. I sat quite still—I did not move."

"And why?" he asked, harshly.

"I, also, was thinking, monsieur. Bon soir."

"One moment, mademoiselle," he said, following her into the house. "Let me tell you how glad I am you have decided to remain a while longer with us."

She looked up at him with a curious smile.

"Monsieur is—glad?"

The sound of an opening door caused them both to glance round.

It was Gilbert, looking unutterably bored.

His face brightened a little on seeing Cora.

"I have been asking everyone, 'Have you seen her?' he declared, sauntering across the hall, with his hands in his pockets. It is rather too bad of you, dad, to monopolise the only amusement on the premises. It is my turn now, and I warn you, if I am left longer to my own diversions, I shall end by going meancholy mad, and plunging a dagger into my manly breast."

Cora gave a shrill little laugh of delight.

"How droll you are!" she cried.

"Never felt more serious in my life," he returned. "I have selected the very article—a nice, sharp little instrument. Hullo, father! where has that old dagger gone?"

Sir Martin was in the act of opening his study door.

He paused.

The dreaded question had come at last!

"Dagger!" Sir Martin repeated, speaking with an effort. "What dagger?"

Why that queer old thing that always hung here, Gilbert explained pointing to the wall. "It was accidentally knocked down, and slightly damaged," Sir Martin said, without looking round. "I have sent it away to be mended."

He went into his room then, his face drawn with the horror of that awful moment.

It must be remembered a pretty rough knock-down, Gilbert remarked to Cora Rozier.

"It sounds as if the old dad had been dining, not wisely, but to well, and had kicked the things about."

He laughed at his own wit, which was always of the very poorest description.

"Was it a real dagger?" Cora asked.

A bright spot of colour was burning in each of her cheeks, her black eyes flashed with excitement.

"Real!" Gilbert echoed, lighting a cigarette. "I should think it was! One of our ancestors was murdered with it—that old chap up there, in the huge ruffe."

Cora thoughtfully regarded the picture.

"That was long ago," she said. "I suppose it is quite blunt and rusty now."

"Quite sharp enough to run through anyone. This old girl"—pointing to another portrait—"was my great-grandmother."

"Old girl! That is not respectful, Monsieur Gilbert! With you it's old everyone. Am I 'old girl,' too?"

"You are the prettiest little witch I have ever seen."

"I heard, to-day," Cora said, casting down her eyes. "that in a little while you will marry a charming English miss."

"Who told you that?"

"Does that matter? I want to hear something of her. Come, sit here, and tell me."

She seated herself on an old oak bench, and patted the place beside her.

Gilbert found her ways irresistible, and soothed his conscience with the thought that Shirley had treated him very badly, by leaving Coddington directly he returned, with scarcely a word of farewell.

"Well," said Cora, with a little sigh, "she is beautiful, of course?"

"You bet she isn't exactly plain," he returned.

"And you adore her?"

"Don't know that I do."

Gilbert did not believe in owing to any girl that he loved another.

"But she, of course, adores you?"

"What makes you think that?" with a conceited smile. "Do you fancy you could manage it?"

"Oh, what a question to ask poor little me! What can I say but 'No'?"

"I should like you to say 'Yes.'"

Cora pensively surveyed the tip of her tiny shoe.

"I do not intend to say it, monsieur," she said, archly.

"Supposing I make you?" He laughed, taking hold of her hands. "I shall keep you prisoner until you do say it."

"I will call Sir Martin."

"I don't mind if you do."

"I am quite afraid of him," she said, opening wide her eyes. "He is so grave, so quiet—he is as if he had some great sorrow."

"Don't know what it can be, then. Seriously, though, the poor old dad has only been like this lately—since—"

He had been going to say "since the murder," but pulled himself up in time.

Cora calmly finished the sentence for him—

"Since my mother was so cruelly killed. Ah, what would I not give to find the cowardly assassin!"

"There is no chance of anyone doing that now," Gilbert said, knocking the ash from his cigarette.

"Do not be too sure," the girl said, em-

phatically. "I may be able to succeed where others failed."

"You!" He stared at her in astonishment. "A wee thing like you?"

"I intend to try. Only do not speak of it to others they will ridicule me. You I know will help me."

"By Jove! yes—if I could."

"We'll commence now. Tell me all that happened, from beginning to end."

"Oh don't ask that!" he cried. "I say it is all to gruesome to repeat. I'll give me the blues. I really can't."

"But Cora had her way, and, bit by bit, gathered all the details of the tragedy, till warning to his subject, he talked on and on, unconscious that almost every word he uttered was strengthening his listener's conviction that his own father was the guilty man.

Afterwards, while having a quiet smoke with Sir Martin, he mentioned the girl's keen curiosity and anxiety to learn every trivial circumstance connected with her mother's murder.

"She had an idea," Sir Martin said, snipping off the end of his cigar, "that she may be able to trace the murderer."

"Oh! she told you so, did she?" Gilbert exclaimed. "She has invited me to assist her."

"In what way?"

"By telling her every blessed thing that occurred during that awful time."

"Take my advice," the elder man said, gravely. "Say as little as possible. If clever men have failed over the affair, what can a bit of a girl like that do, beyond throwing suspicion upon innocent persons?"

"I have already told her all there is to tell," Gilbert said, unconcernedly. "She is an awfully fetching little creature."

"Don't forget, my boy, that you are pledged to the one best little girls in the world, Sir Martin replied.

Gilbert got up and yawned.

"I am going to turn in," he said. "Good-night."

CHAPTER XIII.

It was October.

Dank and drear were the marshes; grey and wild the sea.

Few changes had taken place in Coddington since summer.

The greatest event had been Madge Loraine's wedding.

An account of it, with her portrait, had appeared in the society papers.

It had been a very fashionable affair, a great many titled people had been present, and everything had been done in grand style.

The bride had looked lovely in white brocade.

There was scarcely a girl present who did not envy her.

Shirley, who was chief bridesmaid, was looking pale and tired.

People said she was beginning to lose her good looks.

Mrs. Loraine's explanation was that the dear child had been having too much gsyisty and that she, Mrs. Loraine, intended taking her away for a quiet change.

They went into D-vonshire, and stayed with an old school friend of Mrs. Loraine's a lady who had married a meek and mild parson.

It was certainly a very quiet change.

Shirley sometimes felt the dull monotony of those days would drive her mad.

She spent long hours alone, wandering about the country, thinking always of one person, longing always for the sight of one face.

She hated herself for being too weak and cowardly to acknowledge her love for him, and she writhed beneath the thought of the contempt he must now feel for her.

Poor Shirley, that was a wretched time!

It was as if a great cloud had suddenly arisen and obscured all the brightness of her life.

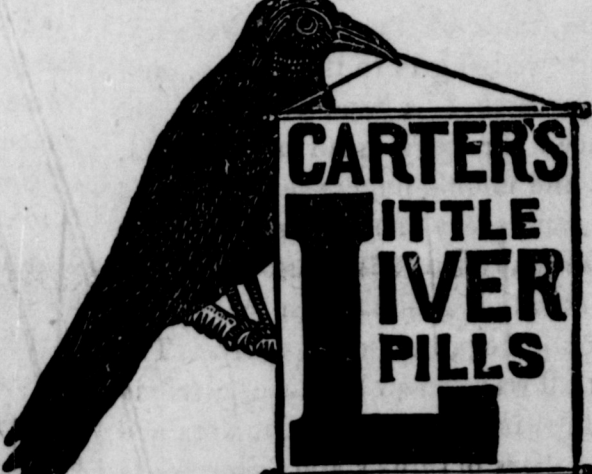
"I can't think what has come to you!" Mrs. Loraine remarked one day, in tones of keen vexation.

"I am very sorry," Shirley meekly replied. "But this place is rather depressing."

She was standing by the window in the long, narrow drawing-room.

It was a wet day the rain had never ceased pouring from the gloomy sky, a loose trail of creeper tapped objectedly.

Continued on Fifteenth Page.



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