

## TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED.  
CHAPTER XXIII.

When Dorrien had loosened Cora's fingers from their frantic clutch, she had gone sliding down the cliff side with a rattle of loose earth and pebbles.

In that second she lived through all the horrors of death.

She knew that the face of the cliff slanted slightly out for a short distance, then sloped suddenly in.

She would fall from there down upon the jagged rocks beneath, over which the waves were washing, for it was high tide.

Though her eyes were closed, she seemed to see it, and her quick ear caught the sound of falling stones, as, helplessly clutching at the earth, she went slipping down to her terrible fate.

A last wild cry, a sickening bound, followed by a painful jerk, which seemed to dislocate every bone in her body, as her clothes caught in an old piece of iron firmly embedded in the cliff.

There, powerless to save herself, she swung from the giddy height, uttering shriek upon shriek.

But even to herself her voice sounded weak and muffled, and seemed to travel no distance in the thick atmosphere.

Then, to her horror, she felt the material of her dress giving way beneath the heavy strain.

From the position in which she was hanging, it was impossible for her to look up without struggling, and she dared not do that.

Had she been able to do so, she would have seen a man peer cautiously over the edge of the cliff; then seeing her perilous position, put his hands to his mouth as if about to shout to her, but, changing his intention, turned and rushed away.

He was one of the coast guards from the Royal Heath station, about ten minutes' quick walk from the spot where every instant threatened to be Cora's last.

The man made all possible speed; but, by the time he had returned with a coil of rope, and two or three men to help, the girl was hanging by the last remnant of her torn serge skirt, and quite unconscious. A couple of moments later and all would have been over, with small harm to anyone but Cora Rozier herself.

As it was, however, the gallant coast-guard lowered himself by the aid of the rope and of his comrades, and so, at the risk of breaking his own neck, saved a very worthless life.

When Cora regained consciousness, she found three bronzed faces bending anxiously over her, while three pairs of rough, but kindly, hands tried to restore animation.

'She's coming round,' one said, sitting upon his heels. 'Give her more air; that's what she wants. Come, missie, you're safe now.'

'Lean on me,' said another, as she attempted to sit up. 'That's it—give her a hand, Jakes.'

Their cheery voices, their honest weather-beaten faces, were so different to the grim horror Cora had looked upon so short a time before, that, at first, she could scarcely realize it had been anything but a hideous delusion, till her brain grew clearer, she remembered all that had occurred—Dorrien's awful, startling confession, his brutal conduct.

She closed her eyes again, not from faintness, but because she wanted to think for an instant or so on her wisest plan of action.

If Dorrien heard she had been saved, he would, in all probability, at once make his escape.

If she went to the police and had him arrested for the murder of her mother, she would lose her hold upon Sir Martin Met-

herell, besides not having sufficient evidence to hang Dorrien.

'She's off again,' said the man named Jakes. 'I wish my missus was here; she'd know what to do.'

'Get a stretcher and carry her,' proposed one of the others.

But at this point Cora opened her eyes.

'I shall feel better directly,' she said. 'You are all very kind; but I don't in the least know how I come to be here.'

'It was Jakes, miss, heard a strange noise as he was walking along,' the man sitting on his heels said; 'and, looking over, he see'd you hanging there by your clothes, miss. He was afeared to call—weren't yer Jakes?—so he just cut along back to us. We brought a rope, and Jakes he goes down, only just in time, miss, for your gown was all torn, and the old bit of iron that loose, it's a marvel it held so long.'

'I must reward you,' Cora said. 'I have nothing with me now; but I am staying with Sir Henry and Lady Ayerst.'

'Don't you think of that, Miss,' they one and all exclaimed. 'We want nothing.'

'You went too near the edge of the cliff?' Jakes questioned. 'It was a mercy you were not killed.'

'I don't know how it happened I saw a bird; it seemed wounded. I tried to catch it, and then suddenly I slipped and fell, and, but for you, my friends—she finished with an eloquent gesture; then added: 'But see, I think I can stand now. Oh, my poor hands are hurt—what scratches, what bruises! But it is dangerous that place, it is cruel!'

She got to her feet, and then, leaning on Jakes's arm began slowly walking towards Royal Heath.

Afterwards they talked of her, and what pluck she had shown, making no fuss over her accident, refusing to have a carriage sent for her, and though stiff and bruised, walked the whole distance.

They did not know how terribly anxious she was to keep the whole thing as quiet as possible so that she might the more easily revenge herself upon Dorrien.

Reaching home, she managed to gain her room unperceived by anyone.

This was comparatively easy, as it was dressing hour.

Having bathed her face, and hands, and taken a dose of sal-volatile, she sat down and hastily penned a few lines, which she placed in an envelope, and addressed to one of the poorest quarters in Paris.

It was Dorrien's death-warrant.

Then she rang the bell, and when the maid appeared, sent a message to Lady Ayerst, to the effect that she was suffering from a bad headache, and consequently, would not come down to dinner that evening.

When everyone was assembled in the dining-hall, a figure, in a long grey cloak crept from the house, and running down the drive, dropped a letter into the pillar-box just out side the gates.

Half an-hour later, Cora, arrayed in a cool white dressing gown, sat by the open window, sipping champagne, and toying with a recherche little supper, which had been daintily placed upon a table beside her easy chair.

Truly, life is strange.

The Ayersts were giving a big dinner-party that night, and the gardens had been decorated with strings of colored lamps, a stand had been erected, and a band had come down from town to perform during the evening.

As the darkness fell, Cora watched the men light up, till the shadowy gardens looked like fairyland, gleaming with colored lights, amethyst, ruby, gold, and blue while divine strains of music filled the air.

Then the guests came out, strolling in twos and threes, or standing in little groups chatting and laughing, till Cora who loved gaiety, longed to join them, yet felt too stiff, and sore, and shaken to attempt to do so.

'Ah, my friend,' she muttered, leaning out into the glorious night, 'you will pay dearly for this day's work!'

Then her brows knitted together in a perplexed frown, while her thoughts worked on.

If Dorrien had murdered Dola Rozier, what had Sir Martin Metherell to do with it? Had they conspired at it together?

For once Cora found herself quite at sea and had in no way fathomed the mystery when at length she retired to bed.

'I shall find out in time,' she said, as she closed her eyes and fell asleep to the strain of the Geisha.

Since that evening by the lake, Madge had lived in a state of suppressed excitement.

For the first time in her life she was shaken from her placid serenity.

A new power had come into her existence, a new emotion and she knew not what to make of it.

One minute feeling desperately angry with herself, the next giving herself up to the strange fascination of the man who had wrought this change in her.

She did not love him; but he attracted her more than any man she had ever met. She was always conscious of his presence.

She found herself speaking in a room full of people, for his ears alone and her heart would quicken its pulsation when he came to her.

On this particular night, it seemed to her that, every time she glanced in his direction, she met his eyes, not staring not noticeably watching, yet giving her the impression that her every action was observed.

But it was not until the evening was drawing to a close that he came to her.

'Can her ladyship spare a patient friend of a few minutes of her society?' he said, meeting her as she came from the drawing-room.

'I am going to ask Mrs. Haliburton to sing,' she answered. 'Have you heard her? Her voice is divine.'

'Her appearance is not,' he said. 'I think she is the ugliest woman I ever met. I have heard men call her handsome.'

'So have I; but I am not answerable for the execrable taste of others. Where are you going, madame? She is in this direction; I met her a few moments since.'

She softly hummed the air the bands were playing, as they walked slowly, side by side, across the lawn.

Beautiful, indeed, did she look that night, in sheen of satin and glimmer of pearl.

No wonder Lord Carsborough found her pleasant to gaze upon.

The very scent of the flowers she was wearing pleased his fastidious fancy.

'Such moments as these,' he said, 'make up for a life time of disappointments.'

'The night is perfect,' she said, wilfully misunderstanding him.

He answered with a quiet laugh. 'And the music,' she went on. 'I think this is a better band than Max Holman's. Do you?' she asked.

'About such trivial matters I'll think what you like. Don't you understand how foolish it is to ask me to take my thoughts from you just now? Perhaps, if you could see yourself, you would realize the insanity of such a proposal.'

'I should have thought such flattery would have been beneath you.'

'Do you think I flatter you?' he questioned, derisively. 'Do you think I find much pleasure in admiring when you are out of my reach? Don't you know that to see you means to want you?'

'I believe you have too much sense to want what you cannot have.'

'What has love to do with sense?' 'We were not talking of love.'

'I am talking of it now.'

'Then ask me no questions concerning it; for I don't know the meaning of the word.'

'Are you sure?'

He bent down and looked her in the face. She felt her cheeks flush hotly.

'I am quite sure,' she said.

'You will learn the lesson some day—every woman does.'

'I shall be an exception.'

'I think not. Do you honestly believe you are going through life perfectly content with the husband you have chosen—a man who has not one refined thought—who has already tired of you, who already thinks other women fairer and more charming than yourself? Ah, you can flash those great eyes at me, and look as proud as you please! I am only speaking the truth, my child, and you know it.'

She felt an hysterical sob rise in her throat.

'You have no right to speak in this way,' she cried, passionately. 'I will not endure it, even from you. Understand, once for all, Lord Carsborough, that, if you wish to be my friend, you must keep within the limits of friendship.'

There is no limit to friendship, Lady Ayerst.

'That is absurd. You don't allow your friends to insult you.'

'Nor your lover, nor your husband, nor anything that is yours. I agree with you there; but the friend who speaks the solid plain truth is a friend worth having.'

'I consider that sort of people odious.'

'Do you consider me odious?'

She hesitated.

'I should if you were always forcing unpleasant truths upon me.'

'Have I attempted to do such a thing?'

'I consider you took a great liberty just now.'

'In saying such a little thing? In merely mentioning a palpable fact? If, indeed, I have offended, let me crave your pardon.'

'You must promise never to talk in such a way again.'

'I cannot promise.'

'Why not?'

'Because I love you, and am not answerable for what I may say. Do not look so terrified. I have not changed since yesterday, or at last week, or last month. I have loved you from the first. You must have known that.'

'I did not know it,' she said, faintly.

'Then the knowledge need make no difference to you, except, perhaps, to make you a little more lenient. You are not angry with me for what is beyond our power to control? I can no more help loving you, you beautiful woman, than I can help the stars shining in the heavens above us.'

'I cannot leave all my guests.'

'For an hour—why not? Besides, I have arranged all that. I have managed to start everyone off on some pursuit. I excited curiosity concerning the Dallow Caves, and a bicycling party have gone over to inspect them. I have worked hard for this one hour's pleasure. Will you come?'

'I am afraid it will rain.'

'We can easily get into shelter if it does.'

She hesitated for a moment or so then began walking towards the house.

A quarter-of-an-hour later she came into the hall in her habit.

Sir Henry was standing there, reading a telegram.

He crushed it in his hand on seeing her, and put it in his coat pocket.

'Going for a ride,' he said. Carsborough is waiting outside for you.'

'Will you come, too?' Madge said eagerly.

'I don't care to ride alone with him—it will be so dull.'

'Nonsense! Don't keep him waiting; and that new mare of yours won't stand.'

'Do come,' she repeated.

She had never wanted him so much before; but every moment she spent alone with Lord Carsborough seemed to strengthen his power over her, and she was afraid.

'I can't come,' Ayerst said, shortly. 'I have some business to attend to.'

'You have had no bad news?' she

asked. 'I ask for nothing in return, but the privilege of being near you now and again. Do you think there are many who can offer you so unselfish and heart-whole a devotion?'

By chance or design he had led her to a quiet path.

There were no lamps here, and only the rising moon peeped over the high yew hedge at them—the man with his fierce eyes, and tall strong figure, and at the woman, slight and graceful in her shimmering satin gown, her lovely face downcast, her small gloved hands nervously playing with her fan.

'I know not how to answer you,' she said, at last. 'If all you have said is true, surely the better and wiser plan would be for us not to meet again.'

'Why,' he asked, 'should you wish to take from me the one poor consolation that I have? Are you afraid for my sake, or your own?'

'Lord Carsborough!'

She looked proudly at him; but her eyes fell before him.

'Then why is it better for us to part? Don't you think that is an old-fashioned, painfully prudish idea? The world has changed since men and women parted because of a hopeless love. What good did it do either—except to add to their misery? If a starving man cannot have a whole loaf, it is not better for him to have even a morsel of it, than none at all? Lady Ayerst my queen, I ask only to be allowed to worship you in silence. Will you deny me this?'

So she listened, and weakly yielded, even against her better judgment, yet with a strange excited gladness thrilling through her veins.

He kissed her hands.

He held them in his own.

He touched her hair with his lips; but all so reverently that she could not take offence.

When she returned to the drawing-room, having failed to meet Mrs. Haliburton, she was surprised to find how long she had been absent. She could not sleep that night, but lay tossing about, recalling, again and again, all that Lord Carsborough had said.

She began to compare him with Sir Henry.

Through the darkness the two faces seemed to look at her.

She shuddered as her mental eyes scanned the thick features and coarseness of her husband's.

She had never felt such contempt and loathing for him as she did that night.

It seemed to her that she had suddenly awakened to life—that hitherto she had been blind.

Then she wondered, if she had remained Madge Loraine, would she have met Lord Carsborough?

It was not probable.

She felt that, after all, she had done well in marrying for money. She did not regret it, and yet—well, no one was ever quite content.

In the morning, while she was looking at her roses, the man who had filled her thoughts all night came to her, and began talking of the very question she had pondered in her mind.

'I wondered,' he said, dropping the end of his cigarette upon the path, and treading upon it, 'if you had not married, should we have met?'

'I think not,' she replied, making her tone indifferent.

'There is no saying,' he said. 'We might have; and then—well, I should have stood as good a chance as Ayerst.'

'You imagine so,' with a little laugh.

'Yes,' he said, 'I imagine so. There are several things I like to imagine. One is Lady Ayerst as Lady Carsborough. You must come to Carsborough Castle in the autumn. I shall like to have you as my guest, and hear your opinion of one of the homes which might have been yours had Fate been a little kinder.'

'I am content with what I have,' Madge returned, but, in her secret heart she knew it was a lie.

'I know you are,' he said. 'I almost wish you were not; but this way danger lies. Let us talk of the weather. Will it rain—will it not? You ought to understand the English climate better than I, since I have been out of it for so long.'

'It looks rather like rain,' Madge said, glancing at the cloudy sky. 'But then, I dare say it will do nothing of the sort. The forecast says "fine."'

'Then let us pin our faith to the forecast and go for a ride. Will you come?'

'Yes. Let us see who will care to join us.'

'I meant you and I alone. One ride together out in the open country—just you and I.'

'I cannot leave all my guests.'

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questioned with a sudden sinking of the heart; for, since that day when he had spoken of ruin, there had come upon her every now and then a deadly terror lest it should ever occur, and the day should come when all she prized so dearly should be swept away.

'Not over good,' Sir Henry answered moodily. 'But we are all right so long as he stands our friend, and he has pledged himself to that. It is only this beastly depression in the City. Everything is as low as it can be. Wish I had never dabbled in stocks and shares. It is rather a dear way of buying experience.'

'But it is all right? You are certain we are all right?'

'My dear girl!' he exclaimed, irritably. 'Of course we are all right. How you do harp on that.'

'She said no more, and going through the outer hall, found Lord Carsborough waiting on the steps for her.'

'Why so grave?' he asked, when they had ridden some way in silence.

'I was thinking,' she said.

'Not pleasant thoughts?'

'How do you know?'

'Why do you ask these questions? I can only make the same answer to all. Because I love you, you are angry; but on this occasion I willingly endure your displeasure, for the delight of seeing such a divine blush. But to return to the thoughts, what were they?'

'Oh, nothing particular! I felt worried—'

'Anxious. Henry seemed to have had bad news about something. Do you know anything about it?'

'It is nothing. Don't worry your pretty head about it.'

'You are quite certain,' she said, anxiously, 'that I have no cause for alarm?'

'Have I not told you that already? Do you doubt me?'

'No, no; why should I?'

'I swear to you,' he said, riding close beside her, 'that, while I live, and you are gracious to me, there shall never be a wish of yours ungratified.'

'You are very kind,' she said, nervously.

'Henry is, indeed, fortunate in having such a friend.'

He turned his fierce, wolfish face toward hers.

'I am no friend to your husband,' he declared. 'I would not lift a finger to save him from instant death. What I do, I do for you, Madge. Because you are the one woman in the world I love and desire.'

'Lord Carsborough!' she exclaimed, indignantly, reining in her horse with so sudden a hand that the animal began to rear and plunge.

Perhaps she lost her nerve, perhaps she was too angry to think of what she was doing, for, the next instant, the frightened horse, receiving a shower of stinging blows from the whip, got the bit between his teeth and bolted.

When Madge found that her horse was entirely beyond her control, she closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, almost fainting with terror, but possessing just sufficient presence of mind to cling with all her strength to the reins and pommel.

The road was a winding one, and Lord Carsborough realized, in an instant, that his only chance of stopping the runaway horse, was to cut straight across the fields, and so reach a certain bend of the road first.

Taking gates and hedges as they came in his way, he rode like mad, and managed to reach the spot in time, cleverly catching the reins of the scared animal as it reared by.

A minute or so more and he had brought it to a standstill, and, having jumped from his own panting steed, had lifted Madge to the ground.

She was dazed with the peril she had been in, and almost unconsciously allowed him to hold her in his arms, till a kiss, pressed upon her forehead, awoke her.

She would have started from him, but he held her firmly.

'I love you,' he declared, passionately. 'I love you.'