

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED. CHAPTER VII.

Dancing was kept up till the small hours of the morning, and dawn was breaking before the last carriage drove away.

Lady Metherell was exhausted after all her duties as hostess; yet, before attempting to rest, she sent a message, by her maid, to Sir Martin, that she wished to speak to him at once.

He found her seated in an arm-chair, her thin figure wrapped in a particularly ugly dressing-gown, her limp grey hair falling about her shoulders.

He never had loved this woman, but, in a way, had grown to respect and even like her.

She was ugly, cold and unsympathetic; but she was a good woman, though her ideas of righteousness were rather narrow.

"My dear Martin," she began, as he closed the door, "I felt that I must speak to you at once. You will have already seen that we have made a great mistake in asking Madame Rozier to the house."

"What is it?" she asked, in alarm. "What is the matter?"

"I scarcely know," the girl answered, with a wretched little laugh. "It all seems like some hideous nightmare. Yet I know it is true. It is cruel to disturb you, she added, remorsefully; but I could endure my thoughts no longer. I felt that they were driving me mad. I pretended to be asleep when you came up; but I have never closed my eyes since then."

"You poor dear!" Shirley exclaimed, pityingly. "Tell me what has happened?"

In answer Lucy held out her left hand, the third finger of which was adorned with a thick gold signet-ring.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"Mean?" Lucy repeated. "Why, that I am the greatest idiot on the whole face of the earth! This is Captain Dorrien's ring. I am engaged to him."

"No—oh, no!" Shirley cried, in real distress. "You don't even like him. You remember what you said about him only yesterday."

Lucy brushed her hair from her forehead. "Am I likely to forget?" she said. "Do you not see it is all a horrible mistake? Only, I don't know how I am ever to put it right. I have looked at it in every way. I think it will send me crazy."

Shirley put her arms about her.

"Tell me," she said, gently, "how it has happened. I am sure between us we shall think of some way out of it. Of course, you cannot be engaged to him—it is too ridiculous; but even if you are at the present moment, you shall not be for many hours longer. You need only say you have changed your mind, and give him back his old ring."

Lucy shook her head.

"That is just what I can't do," she declared. "When you hear everything, you will think so, too. Yesterday afternoon Harold Ridley gave me a rose. I—I pinned it to my dress last night, and he noticed it. He asked me why I had done so, and I gave some silly answer. I felt suddenly afraid lest he should know how much I cared for him."

"We went on to the terrace, and then down to the lawn. You know the seat by the fountain—we sat there. After a short time he spoke again about my wearing his flower, when he knew Dorrien had sent me such beauties. He leant forward and put his hand over mine."

"I don't know what he was going to say, but the look in his eyes made me feel that my chance of happiness had come. Then someone called him—one of the men—Ridley! Ridley! you are wanted, and he noticed it. He asked me why I had done so, and I gave some silly answer. I felt suddenly afraid lest he should know how much I cared for him."

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Lucy sat up, and looked to where Shirley lay, calmly sleeping, one white arm thrown above her head, her lips parted in a smile.

She was dreaming she was dancing with the artist.

He had forgiven her; they understood one another.

Her feet felt light as air.

They went on dancing, dancing, dancing, till suddenly she caught sight of Gilbert Metherell.

He was looking furious.

"Shirley!" he called, loudly. "Shirley!"

She started up—it was no dream—someone was calling her.

And as the sleep left her eyes, they rested on Lucy—Lucy pale and troubled, with her hair all disordered, and on her face such an expression of misery, that Shirley saw at once that something awful had happened.

"What is it?" she cried, in alarm. "What is the matter?"

"I scarcely know," the girl answered, with a wretched little laugh. "It all seems like some hideous nightmare. Yet I know it is true. It is cruel to disturb you, she added, remorsefully; but I could endure my thoughts no longer. I felt that they were driving me mad. I pretended to be asleep when you came up; but I have never closed my eyes since then."

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Ridley never knows the truth. You will stand by me, won't you, Shirley? You are the only one I would trust with such a secret."

And then she just laid her head on her friends' shoulder, and burst into a storm of sobs.

Shirley waited in silent sympathy till she grew calmer.

"What a coward I am!" she exclaimed, at last. "Still a good cry does relieve your feelings. Only you had no business to keep me company. What a selfish wretch I am, to spoil your fun! We will ring for Rose, have some tea, dress, and go out. Just see what a glorious day it is!"

She had touched the electric bell, and drawn up the blind, letting in a flood of sunshine and balmy summer air.

"It will all come right," Shirley said, hopefully, as they leant from the open window. "You never need marry him."

Lucy shuddered.

"I would rather die. I shall have to pretend, for a little time, that I meant what I said, and then break it off. Of course the other is all over. Harold never cared, so I won't."

She laughed, but her lips were quivering, and she bent her face over the flowers in the window-box, to hide it.

Early as they were out that morning, they were surprised to find Sir Martin was before them.

"They came upon him suddenly, walking alone in a sequestered part of the grounds, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bowed."

He glanced up, with a start, as the two girls appeared on the walk.

"You are early birds," he said, forcing a smile. "I did not expect any ladies to appear before lunch."

He kissed Shirley, who was a pet of his. She regarded his haggard, pallid face with concern.

"You look quite knocked up!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you go in and rest?"

"You are looking fresh as a daisy," he said, "and so, also, is Miss Brend; but I suppose old age is beginning to tell on me."

They made some laughing reply, and left him.

They were going down to the beach, they said, to have a look at the sea.

He had pulled himself together while speaking to them; but, directly they had gone, his shoulders resumed their forlorn stoop, and, as he slowly paced the length of the gravel-path, he looked like an old man.

The burden of his sin was pressing heavily upon him.