

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED.

"That is not very likely. I am coming to your wedding."

"My dear boy don't be so absurd." "You haven't called me that since that afternoon when you jilted me. What did you do it for Shirley? It was a beastly cruel thing to do."

"It would have been more cruel not to have done it," she replied, gravely. "I think we won't talk about it—it is rather foolish. We are both engaged, and we are both very happy."

"I am not," he declared. "I never shall be until I have you. You are mine by right; you belonged to me first, before that fellow came sneaking round trying to get you away from me. What are you stopping for—what are you going to do?"

"I don't wish to walk any further, thanks. I am going to bed."

She sprang into the saddle, and would have ridden off had he not seized the handle-bar.

"I'm hanged if you shall!" he declared, angrily. "You shall listen to me this once, whether you want to or not. You made me love you—you promised to be my wife. I was a fool not to hold you to that promise. You can't play fast and loose with a fellow like that."

Shirley's face had grown white with anger in which perhaps there was a mingling of fear, for Gilbert Metherell looked rather unpleasantly desperate.

"Let me go at once," she commanded. "How dare you behave in this way? Do you hear me, Mr. Metherell?"

"I see you," he answered, insolently; "that is enough for you."

Then, before she was aware of his intention, he had flung his arm round her waist, dragged her down, and kissed her, with rough force, half-a-dozen times.

"I will never forgive you!" she cried passionately, as he released her. "I will never speak to you again."

"I don't care," he returned, surlily. "I have done what I have been wanting to do ever since I went to Royal Heath."

He stood on one side, and watched her ride away.

He knew that he had offended past all forgiveness; but he had kissed her. Shirley had never felt so angry in the whole of her life.

She went along with her little teeth set firmly together, vowing vengeance on Gilbert Metherell.

Her face still burnt from his kisses. She felt that the horrible sensation would never pass away.

She was close to Royal Heath when she met Vivian West.

He was strolling down the road to meet her, so he said.

He had been playing in a cricket-match that afternoon; it was just over, and he was still in his flannels, looking—so Shirley thought—handsomer than any man she had ever seen.

She had jumped off her bicycle on meeting him.

He took her hand, and would have held it to his lips; but she jerked it from him so suddenly, that he looked at her in amazement.

"I am not mad," she explained. "Only furious."

"Why? What has happened? What have I done?"

"You?—nothing. It is Gilbert Metherell. I think he must have been tipsy. He was most insolent. I don't want you to touch me anywhere where his horrid hands have been."

"What do you mean, Shirley?" West asked. "The fellow hasn't dared to insult you?"

"He has—he kissed me, not once, but heaps of times. He dragged me off my bicycle—he behaved like an utter cad."

It relieved her feelings to recount the way in which she had been treated.

It was not until afterwards that the thought crossed her mind that, perhaps, it would have been wiser to have held her tongue.

West received the news very quietly, so quietly, indeed, that Shirley felt rather hurt until she met his eyes, and saw the passion burning in them.

He left her at the gates.

"I shall, probably, be late for dinner," he said. "Will you make my excuses to Madge?"

"Where are you going?" she questioned, in surprise.

"To see Mr. Gilbert Metherell," he replied.

"Don't!" she cried, laying a detaining hand upon his arm. "He is not worth it. Perhaps not; but I am going."

"What will you say to him?"

"Nothing," with a curl of the lip. "I shall give him a thrashing, that is all."

"Vivian, for my sake don't do anything foolish," she implored, nervously. "Besides, he is so vindictive, he will never rest until he revenges himself on you. Leave him alone, and let us forget him."

"I will thrash him first and we will forget him afterwards."

The expression of his face showed her that it was utterly useless to argue with him, and so she let him go, knowing that she had not the power to keep him.

It was then that she wished she had said nothing about it.

Madge, to whom she told the whole story, comforted her by saying that a hoarse-whipping would do Gilbert good—his conduct richly deserved it.

"And," she added, "he will have Cora Rozier to console him afterwards."

"Has she gone?" Shirley exclaimed.

"At last, yes. Said she felt so very unwell, she thought she had better go home."

"What can be the matter with her? Do you know, Madge? I can't help feeling sorry for her; she will have such an awful time of it with Gilbert Metherell."

"I fancy they are very well matched." "I suppose they are, Shirley agreed. "It is impossible to say which is the most unpleasant."

At that precise moment Cora was travelling by train to Coddington.

She had driven to the station, where she had taken a first-class ticket.

When the train came it, she walked quickly past the carriages till she came to one, on a window of which a tiny three-cornered piece of white paper was sticking.

Opening the door, she jumped in, closing it after her.

A man was sitting at the other end of the compartment.

He glanced at her as she got in, then continued reading his paper.

Another minute, and the train was steaming from the station.

The instant they were clear of it, Cora sprang up, and seated herself opposite the man, who at once put down his paper.

"You are not Paul Duvet," she said, in French.

He answered in the same language. "I am his brother. Paul has never recovered his long imprisonment. He is dying; but I—I thirst to avenge him."

"The hour is here!" she said. "Do you know him?"

"This English devil, no; but you will point him out to me, and I—see here!" He drew stealthily from his place of concealment, a long, cruel looking knife. "With that in my hand, and hate in my heart, he cannot hope for escape."

She smiled.

"It must be done to-night," she said. "You must come up to the house with this—pulling a bracelet off her wrist—'say that you found it outside the gates. I will continue to see you, and show you Jim Hartland. He goes by the name of Dorrien. You must lose no time, or he will give us the slip."

The man showed his white teeth in a fierce grin.

He was a cadaverous looking creature, with a thin, yellow face, beady black eyes, and a great wicked looking mouth.

His clothes though respectable, were shabby.

"I have carried out all your instructions," he said, folding his long, bony hands together. "They have cost money. I have none left."

She gave him her purse.

"I will send you more," she said.

"I want but sufficient to take me home," he answered. "I do this, not for money, but revenge."

The journey from Royal Heath to Coddington took little more than ten minutes.

Cora's companion was reading the newspaper when the train stopped.

She stepped on the platform without looking in his direction, and, engaging a fly, ordered the man to drive to Metherell Court.

Arriving there, she went straight to the smoking-room, and, flinging open the door walked in.

She had expected her appearance would be an awful shock to Dorrien; but she saw at once that he had been aware of her escape, and was prepared to see her at any moment.

She wondered how he had heard, and why he had not escaped.

Thought passed quickly.

Cora had taken in the whole situation while the two men rose to their feet, Gilbert exclaiming, in more surprise than pleasure—

"Cora! by all that's holy!"

"Ah, yes, Cora!" she said. "I grew so fatigued of it, Gilbert, after you had departed, that I said adieu, and followed."

Might have let us know you were coming, he said, dropping into her chair again. I've just arranged to run up town, and, unfortunately, can't put it off now. Oh, I forgot you didn't know each other—Mademoiselle Rozier, Captain Dorrien."

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