

## TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

### CHAPTER XXVII CONTINUED.

'A quitted!' he exclaimed. 'By gad! I thought they'd hang him!'

'He has had a narrow escape,' Madge said. 'Everything seemed to be going against him.'

'They might just as well have done the thing properly,' Sir Henry declared. 'He has got off because of insufficient evidence, but they have not proved his innocence.'

'They have decided that he is not guilty.'

'I say they have not proved it. Until that is done, there won't be many who will believe in him.'

Sir Henry was right; the world talked, argued, doubted.

When Vivian West turned to face it again, he met with cuts and insults.

It seemed such a little while before the outside whispers, and the blighting breath of scandal, came into his Paradise like some fiercely bitter wind.

He charmed to meet an old acquaintance one day—a man he had been rather friendly with—and went forward gladly to greet him; but the smile froze on his lips, the hand he had outstretched in welcome fell slowly to his side, as the other, having regarded him with supreme contempt, turned on his heel, and walked away.

It was the first knowledge he had that, though a quitted, he was still suspected.

He had been going to meet Shirley; but, instead of doing so he went away far into the country, pursued, wherever he went, by the recollection of the insult he had just received.

His handsome face was white to the lips—his eyes blazed with anger.

When all old acquaintances going to treat him so? he wondered.

Was this but one example of their feeling towards him?

Then he thought of Shirley.

How could he ask her to share his ruined life?

He had been living in a dream of late.

He felt he had awakened at last.

Shirley walked along the seashore, waiting for one who never came.

She was disappointed; but she felt certain that something important had kept him.

Her thoughts were all pleasant ones.

She walked along by the margin of the waves, smiling to herself, sometimes singing gey snatches of song, but thinking always of the man she loved.

It was growing late in the afternoon when she returned home.

Mrs. Loraine was in the drawing-room.

She looked up rather fretfully as her daughter entered.

'You must ring for some fresh tea; this has been standing too long. I wish you would take the trouble to come in at the proper hour.'

'I am sorry to be late,' Shirley said, sweetly. 'It was so lovely out.'

'Have you been alone?'

The question was sharply put.

Shirley answered, with slight surprise—'Yes, I did not meet Vivian.'

'You seem to be always with him.'

The girl gave a happy little laugh.

'I wish I were,' she said.

'I don't know what your sister will say when she returns,' and Mrs. Loraine gave an aggravating smile.

Shirley was in the act of helping herself to a slice of bread-and-butter; she lifted it from the dish, and daintily folded it together.

'What do you think she is likely to say?' she questioned.

'I am afraid to think. She will, of course say I have been most foolish in allowing you to go on in the way you have lately. I am certain to get all the blame.'

'The blame for what?' Shirley looked

and felt quite mystified. 'I wish you would speak out,' she said, impatiently, 'and say what you mean.'

'I mean, then—speaking with asperity—that until this afternoon I had no idea that any stigma rested upon Vivian's name, or that society intended to cut him.'

Shirley stood staring at her mother, her blue eyes wide open with intense astonishment, while the latter continued, in an aggrieved voice: 'Captain Kemp called this afternoon. He came down about the house he is building, and so called in on his way to the station. He said how unfortunate it was, and spoke most feelingly about you, said that he pitied you more than he could say. He took it for granted that the engagement had been broken off. I did not enlighten him, for I saw that it must come to that. He said that, of course, Vivian West was ruined for ever. He said, also, that he had dared to hold out his hand to him.'

'And you listened,' Shirley cried, with withering scorn, her eyes flashing from her small, passionate face, 'and never told Captain Kemp that he was a wretched cad to talk in that way. Oh, if I had only been here!'

'I wish you had been here; you would have seen, then, how very serious it is. But of one thing I am certain, and that is, that Madge will insist upon your ceasing to have any acquaintance with Vivian.'

Shirley gave a little angry laugh.

'Neither Madge, nor you, nor the whole world, could make me do that.'

Then the door opened and Vivian West walked in.

Neither had heard his knock.

Mrs. Loraine's sallow fretful face turned an uncomfortable red at his unexpected appearance.

'Talk of angels!' she cried, with a nervous laugh. 'We were just speaking about you, Vivian.'

'Indeed,' he said. 'I have come to apologise to Shirley for not meeting her this afternoon.' Then, turning to the girl, who had gone to his side: 'I was so sorry, but it was impossible for me to come.'

'Take me for a drive this evening instead she said, slipping her hand through his arm. 'Let us have some tea at once, and then go.'

Her voice still had a tremor of anger in it, and her eyes were still dark with wrath and indignation.

Mrs. Loraine's temper began to rise, at being so openly defied.

She glanced severely at her daughter, who was pouring out the tea the maid had just brought in.

'Remember,' she said, warningly 'what I have told you.'

'I am not likely to forget,' Shirley replied in a tone which implied that her mother had said some disgraceful thing which would live in her memory for ever.

Vivian saw that something was wrong, and dispelled an unpleasant silence by inquiring after Lady Ayerst.

'She is very well, thank you,' Mrs. Loraine said, sourly.

'Are they likely to come to Roy's Heath again this year?' he inquired, with a view to keeping up some sort of conversation.

Oh, I hope so—I most sincerely hope so.

'Mother cannot exist without Madge,' Shirley interposed, with a small touch of spite. 'She is mother's backbone.'

I confess that I rely upon her judgment and worldly knowledge. Madge is not one who would bring trouble or disgrace upon me.'

'Neither of your daughters would be likely to do that,' Vivian quietly remarked.

'I don't know about Shirley,' Mrs. Loraine cried hysterically. 'She rushes head long at everything, never listens to reason or advice, and I have to suffer!'

Shirley snapped her teeth through a piece of cake.

Vivian looked fondly at her.

'What have you been doing now?' he asked, in a half smiling reproach.

She shook her head.

'Nothing. Mother is always afraid that Madge is going to swoop down upon her and blow her up. Drink your tea, and go.'

'You intend to go, then?'

This was from Mrs. Loraine, who was beginning to feel she would like to hurt someone.

Vivian turned his clear, penetrating gaze upon her.

'Is there any reason why she should not go?'

Mrs. Loraine, picked up a book, and turned the leaves in a flutter.

'I should have thought,' she said, 'that your common sense would have told you there is every reason why she should not go—I—'

'If you say another word,' Shirley interrupted, fiercely, 'I will never forgive you.'

Vivian laid his hand upon her shoulder.

'Darling,' he whispered, 'don't. Well, you will come at once?'

'If your mother really objects to your driving this evening—'

'Oh, go—go!' Mrs. Loraine cried, bursting into tears. 'Don't mind me—don't study my feelings. I am of no consequence.'

She was one of those women who shed tears at the slightest provocation.

Shirley, knowing this, regarded them with disdain, while West looked on, not knowing what to do.

'I had better go,' he said to Shirley. 'Your mother seems to be upset about something.'

'I am,' Mrs. Loraine declared, 'most upset.'

I have always liked you, Vivian, though I have seen so little of you. Lady Ayerst—dear Madge—has always spoken sweetly of you. But now everything has changed. I don't know how to explain it to you, I am sure. I had no knowledge of it until Captain Kemp called this afternoon. He talked about the—about the murder, and I saw then, that, of course, it must all end between you and Shirley.'

She wailed it out between sniffs and tears. Vivian waited for her to finish, then said in that quiet way of his, when deeply hurt or angered—

'I met Captain Kemp this afternoon. His is the first intimation I have received anyone can still believe me guilty. If there are others—if it is universal belief—then, of course, I must give up all hope of having Shirley.'

'I knew you would take it in a sensible way,' Mrs. Loraine exclaimed in accents of relief, as she wiped her eyes. 'There is no one more sorry for you than I; but until society recognises you as being utterly blameless, it would be better for you and Shirley not to see one another.'

'Until Vivian ceases to care for me,' Shirley declared, stoutly. 'I will never give him up. So far as I am concerned, society can cut us both dead. I don't want society. I only want Vivian.'

She turned to him with a charming gesture of love and confidence.

He was her all—she asked for nothing more.

'I am thankful Vivian has more sense than you,' her mother cried, impatiently. 'It is far wiser to face the worst at once. If society—Shirley ground her teeth—refuses to recognise him, he is ruined in every way, because then his pictures would not sell. At least, so Captain Kemp—'

'Would it not be kinder,' Shirley broke in, 'to spare us the horrible details of your friend's conversation. I am going into the garden, Vivian; will you come?'

He did not follow her immediately.

Mrs. Loraine seized the opportunity of talking to him alone.

Shirley was so young, she said, young and ignorant, and so deplorably self-willed. Then, too, when she—Mrs. Loraine—died, Shirley would have but a mere pittance, not sufficient to keep her in cloisters. She had extravagant tastes, and would never do for a poor man's wife. She had trusted that Vivian would persuade her to look at the matter in a sensible light. It would be most dishonorable to do anything else.

Vivian West listened in silence, cut to the quick by almost every word she uttered.

'I am not likely to behave in a dishonorable way to Shirley,' he said, when she had talked herself breathless. 'If I find that Captain Kemp is an example of public feeling towards me, I will give her up. Till then I will not be seen about with her more than can be helped.'

'It would be better to go abroad and change your name,' she suggested.

'What for?' he asked, with a calm surprise.

She was rather taken aback.

'Oh, well, of course, I mean so that you may begin afresh!'

'Driven from my country by the evil suspicions of those who, a short time ago, called themselves my friends! You said just now, Mrs. Loraine, that it was better to face the worst. I think so, too, and I intend to stay and face it.'

She would have liked him to have broken off the engagement and gone right away at once; still, she could not but admit that he had behaved very nicely.

No one could have been more gentlemanly.

She went into the next room and wrote a long letter to Madge, telling her all that had occurred, and asking her advice.

'Shirley, of course, is unmanageable,' she wrote; 'I wish so much you were here, dear, to enforce obedience.'

While the pen flew over the paper, leaving in its train rows of neatly written words, Shirley was clinging to Vivian's arm as they walked round and about the small garden.

'You need not repeat one word of what mother has been saying,' she said, brushing her cheek against his arm. 'I know

exactly the sort of thing she would say. Mother always rides rough-shod over people's feelings.'

'She is naturally anxious about you,' he replied. 'I was always surprised that they allowed me to have you. You deserved someone better than a poor struggling artist.'

'Vivian, I shall think you a hypocrite if you talk like that! They would never have consented had you not been just at the top of the tree. You know how they and most people behaved before. I am glad your sun has gone in for a time, because now I can prove to you that I can be true in adversity.'

He looked into her shining eyes.

'Oh, sweetheart!' he said, with yearning sadness, 'it will be hard to part.'

'We never will,' she cried, defiantly, 'never, never! Let them all rave and talk, but they never shall part us.'

He smiled at her eager upturned face; but in his heart he knew that, if the world turned against him, he could never hope to win her.

'We must be patient,' he said, 'and wait. Things will right themselves in time.'

'I will wait for ever, with you.'

It was all the same; she would not entertain a thought that meant separation.

He left her at last, cheered in spite of the cloud that cast so dark a shadow upon him.

Shirley walked through the meadows with him, to that gate where, more than a year ago, they had parted.

'Do you remember?' she questioned. 'I loved you then with all my heart. I did not know how great my love was, and I was weak and frightened. When I thought of it, I used to feel I should die of shame.'

She rested her head upon his breast, and he put his arms about her, holding her closely.

'My dear one,' he said, 'I do not understand them. I was more to blame than you.'

'We never thought, that morning,' she said, softly, 'that we should ever stand like this, here.'

Mrs. Loraine did not mention Vivian West's name to Shirley again that evening.

She was rather cold and dignified, looked like a suffering martyr, and said she had a bad headache.

For a few days all went on the same as usual.

The two letters came from Scotland, one for Mrs. Loraine the other for Shirley.

They arrived by the second post, just at the conclusion of breakfast.

Shirley read hers through, then passed it to her mother.

'You have been writing to Madge,' she said.

'Well, is there anything strange in that?'

'You have been telling her what that odious man said.'

'If you mean Captain Kemp, I naturally mentioned what he told me. I wished to know if it were true, I suppose she tells you that it is. If you wait one moment I will read what she says to me.'

'I will not listen,' the girl declared, passionately. 'There are a few people who don't turn their backs on a man simply because he has lied told about him. I happen to be one of the few, and nothing will change me.'

Mrs. Loraine regarded her helplessly.

'You are just like your poor father,' she said at last, 'and you know what he brought us to.'

'Dear dad!' Shirley said, with a sudden softening of expression. 'I feel very proud when you say I am like him. It was only his fault that people cheated him, and things went wrong.'

'Had he been more cautious—where are you going to be?'

'I am going to answer Madge's letter at once.'

'I think you had better leave that for me to do. You will say a lot of foolish things, and make them both angry with us.'

'It won't hurt them, and I am quite certain it won't hurt us.'

'You forget how we are placed,' Mrs. Loraine cried, pouring some milk into a saucer for her favorite cat. 'Scarcely enough to live on. The few luxuries I enjoy now, I owe to Madge and Henry.'

'They won't visit my sins on you.'

'They will feel you are disgracing our name.'

Shirley looked dangerous.

'By marrying a good and honorable man?' she said.

'By marrying one who is under a ban, her mother corrected.

It was the first occasion on which the subject had been mentioned since that afternoon when Vivian had been present.

They had tacitly avoided his name.

Mrs. Loraine had been waiting for an answer to her letter, to tell her how to act.

She was one of those weak, irresolute women who never dare act on her own responsibility.

When her husband had been living, she had looked to him for everything; at his death, Madge took his place.

Now that Madge had married and gone away, she lived in a tormenting state of doubt and indecision.

'Under a ban!' Shirley repeated. 'Oh, how unjust you all are! How hateful! Surely, if Gilbert's father holds out his hand to Vivian, and takes him to his home—'

'Oh, don't quote Sir Martin to me,' Mrs. Loraine interrupted, testily. 'Everyone knows he is mad, poor man. His actions would carry no weight with them. Look how he countenanced and encouraged poor Gilbert's engagement to that abominable little foreign creature. I hear she is still at the Court. He will be marrying her himself next.'

Mrs. Loraine might have continued talking for some time, had she not discovered she was addressing the chairs and tables.

Shirley had gone.

Her mother sighed heavily, as if all the cares of the world were pressing upon her.

The cat jumped on her lap and clawed a

piece of bacon off her plate, for which she smote its fluffy sides sharply.

When you are feeling annoyed and put out, it is rather soothing to smack even the cat.

### CHAPTER XXVIII.

Shirley wrote her letter.

She did not say much, but that little was couched in emphatic language, with several words underlined.

When Lady Ayerst read this epistle, she smiled, and said—

'Silly child!'

But though the letter amused her, she felt sorry for Shirley.

'It was such a disappointment,' she thought.

'It was most unfortunate that things should have turned out so badly.'

Then she sat down to her writing-table, and penned a few lines to Vivian West.

It is astonishing how coldly cruel the women who have never loved or suffered can be.

'DEAR MR. WEST,' she wrote, 'I have just received a very foolish letter from my sister, saying that she absolutely refuses to break her word to you, as an honorable man, to give her up.'

'I have no wish to speak of the sad events of the past few months. I, personally, believe you to be entirely innocent of the charge brought against you; but the world thinks differently, and I am sure you will understand that while you are under such a cloud, it would be wicked to hold Shirley to a promise given under such very different circumstances.'

'With sincere wishes for your future happiness.'

'Sincerely yours,'

'MADGE AYERST.'

Vivian received this letter a couple of mornings later.

It was brought up to him with his shaving-water.

'Have these women no hearts?' he exclaimed, bitterly.

Then for a moment, in the solitude of his own room, he broke down.

Smothering tears rose to his eyes.

'My God!' he cried, 'why has this curse come upon me? What have I done that I should be suspected of this hateful crime? Will the truth ever be revealed? Will the darkness ever pass away?'

He felt that his burden had, indeed, grown heavier than he could bear.

After breakfast, while he was taking a stroll on the terrace with Sir Martin, the elder man looked at him searchingly, and said—

'You are not happy, my boy! What is wrong?'

'My whole life,' the young fellow answered, with a reckless laugh. 'I must have been born under an exceptionally unlucky star.'

'I was hoping,' Sir Martin said, 'that you were contented and happy here. What is it that is troubling you? Cannot I help you?'

'If it were possible, I know that you would,' Vivian replied, gratefully. 'But—well this will explain it to you.'

He drew Lady Ayerst's letter from his pocket.

Sir Martin opened and read it.

'She is surely out of her senses!' he exclaimed. 'You were tried and found not guilty. What does she mean?'

'That nothing was really proved. There was not sufficient evidence to hang me, neither was there sufficient to clear me. The judge and the jury gave me the benefit of the doubt. The public generally—amongst them my old friends—prefer to believe the worst. I had an inkling of this a week or so ago. I believed—I could not help believing—that it was only an individual here and there who could think so badly of me. It appears I was mistaken.'

He leaned upon the stone balustrade.

A sea-breeze was scattering the late roses in a shower of petals across the terrace. The wooden slopes were one mass of beautiful colouring, and beyond, between the trees and sky, a sketch of deep blue sea.

No artist could have wished for a fairer view.

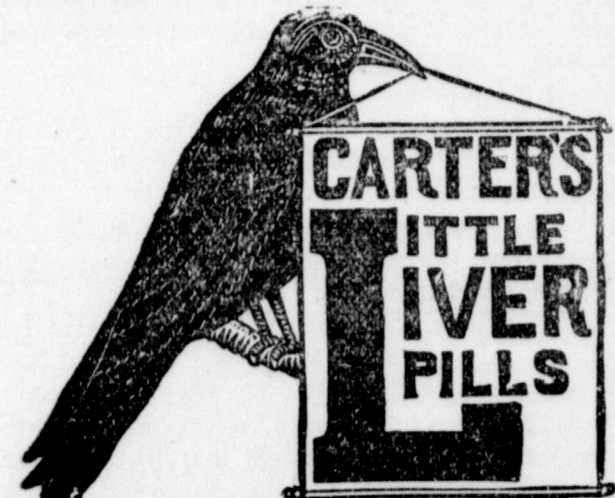
Vivian West, as it were, unconsciously felt its loveliness, though it seemed but to add to the pain of his thoughts.

Sir Martin laid a hand upon his shoulder.

'I have never seen you desponding before,' he said. 'Don't give away don't let this crush you.'

'I am thinking of her,' the young fellow said, hoarsely. 'If I were the only one to suffer, it would be different. But—poor little Shirley. It seems to me that, either way, I am bound to hurt her.'

Continued on Fifteenth Page.



## SICK HEADACHE