

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

CONTINUED.

Fairfield was a pretty little place, a low white house, with a wide verandah running round it, up which clambered wistaria, roses and honeysuckle.

The front door stood wide open. In the middle of the hall a Persian cat sat cleaning itself.

It rose, with a purr of pleasure, as Shirley entered, and followed her into the dining room, where lunch was just commenced.

"Late, as usual!" Mrs. Loraine said, rather fretfully.

Adversity had made her inclined to be irritable.

"Only five minutes," Shirley said, with a glance at the clock. "One may be forgiven such a small sin."

"Madge and I caught sight of you," Lucy informed her with a knowing look. "We had not the heart to disturb you."

Shirley blushed, as she helped herself to salad.

"It was awfully good of you," she returned.

"Lady Metherell is going to Ilfracombe," Mrs. Loraine said; "and Gilbert Metherell starts to-morrow to join some yachting friends. I suppose he will return engaged."

"I suppose he will," Shirley agreed.

"Not many girls would refuse the prospective master of Metherell Court."

Mrs. Loraine spoke with an aggrieved air.

She had hoped that Shirley would accept what was so patiently offered her; but months had gone by and nothing had come of it, and she now believed that the girl had lost her chance of making a really good match.

It was annoying—she could not help feeling vexed about it—and, though she had never spoken openly on the subject to Shirley, she could not resist the temptation of talking at her, whenever the opportunity occurred.

"There are heaps of mercenary people in the world," Shirley remarked, "and I hope it will afford you some satisfaction to hear I am one of them."

"What do you mean?" Madge asked, surprised at her young sister's tone. You surely have not—

But Shirley cut short all further questioning.

"I have done the deed!" she declared, tragically. "I am going to give Lady Metherell the extreme satisfaction of becoming my mother-in-law."

"Shirley!"

Three pairs of eyes were fixed on her; three voices pronounced her name in three different keys.

"I am making quite a sensation!" she said, her eyes full of fun.

"Are you joking?" Lucy inquired.

She could not believe Shirley had accepted a man she cared absolutely nothing for.

"No, I am horribly serious," Shirley replied; "only, you make me laugh."

"You are engaged to Gilbert Metherell!" Madge said.

"I am prepared to swear it," Shirley declared. "I wish you would behave properly, and say how glad you are. Perhaps the sight of the ring will cheer you."

"It is really a fact," Mrs. Loraine said, her eyes filling with tears. "I can only say that this is the first happy moment I have experienced since the beginning of our sad trials."

Shirley jumped up, and kissed her.

"The trials are over," she said, lovingly. "You must not think of them any more. We are all going to be as happy as sand-boys. Gilbert is coming this afternoon, and I have promised him cake for tea. We will give him one of Madge's efforts, and do the thing handsomely."

"There is not one to give," Madge said. "Those cakes were not appreciated, so I gave them away."

"How foolish!" her sister cried, returning to her seat.

"I am sure Shirley seems very happy," Mrs. Loraine said to Madge, as they sat in the garden, after lunch.

Madge was sitting with her slender white hands clasped in her lap.

"I think she is perfectly so," she replied, serenely.

Mrs. Loraine stroked the Persian cat she was nursing.

"I did not quite like," she began, hesitatingly, "what she said about being mercenary. You don't think—"

Madge laughed, in her pretty soft way.

"I think," she said, "if we paid attention to all the nonsense Shirley talks, we should have enough to do. On this occasion she has entirely pleased herself; neither you nor I have attempted to persuade her."

"That is true," Mrs. Loraine said, with a sigh of relief.

Then she began talking of the trousseau, and the wedding, and all the honor and glory that was coming back to them.

Shirley was upstairs, dressing for the afternoon.

She had just completed her toilet, when Lucy came in.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," she said, going straight up to Shirley, and placing her hands on the girl's slim shoulders. "I want to know what has induced you to take this step? You don't care a button for Gilbert Metherell—you know you do not."

"So as I don't care a button for anyone else, that won't signify," Shirley answered.

"And how do you know that you will not care for anyone else?" Lucy asked scornfully. "You don't know what love is yet."

"Perhaps it is quite as well that I don't," Shirley returned, placidly fastening a spray of honeysuckle in her dress.

"But you will some day," Lucy expostulated, "and then it will be too late, and you will be wretched."

Shirley laughed.

"What a dreadful person you are! Seriously, though, I am quite safe. I have met the only man I could fall in love with. He would have nothing to say to me. He was very poor and horribly rude, and, altogether, it would have been a most undesirable attachment. I have got over it, and am quite contented with my lot. So there—what more can I say?"

"You are sacrificing yourself for your mother and sister," Lucy continued, paying no heed to what she said. "You don't care enough about money to do it for yourself; but Madge wants Bushmead, and your mother pins for the luxury she has been accustomed to, and you think that, by marrying young Metherell, you will be able to gratify their desires."

"Dear me, I sound quite unselfish!"

"Shirley, you are never serious. You make me angry. Your people are very sweet and charming, but cold—cold as ice. You are not like that; you have a heart, and you are horribly impulsive, and it is you are mad enough to marry Gilbert Metherell, you will be wretched."

"Oh, how you pile up the agony!"

"I am not going to pile it up any more. I have said what I think. I did not expect you to listen."

"But I have listened," Shirley insisted. "I thought it beautiful, dear, but rather harrowing. Get your bike, and let us go for a spin."

Lucy followed, more slowly.

Just as they were taking their bicycles out, a carriage drew up before the gate, and Lady Metherell alighted.

"My dear Shirley," she said, graciously embracing her, "Gilbert has told me the welcome news. Sir Martin and I are well pleased. I am going to take you home with me until tomorrow. So run and put your things together, while I talk to your mamma."

Mrs. Loraine was crossing the lawn to speak to her visitor.

Lady Metherell turned to meet her, while Shirley vainly endeavoured to think of some excuse.

She did not want to go to the Court.

The thought of spending hours alone with the Metherells was anything but enticing, especially under existing circumstances.

Still, there was no help for it.

Whatever she said would be overruled, she knew, so she returned to her room, and, with Lucy's help, packed a dinner-dress and a few other things into a portmanteau, then drove off, seated in state beside Lady Metherell, who was about the only person on earth she stood in awe of.

On this particular afternoon her ladyship was affable itself, and was chattering away in quite a genial manner, when the pleasant flow of conversation was suddenly cut short.

A traction engine, lumbering along the road, frightened the horses.

They reared and plunged, every touch of the whip seeming but to add to their terror.

A man ran up to hold their heads, but was to late.

The frantic animals dashed forward, and raced headlong down the hill.

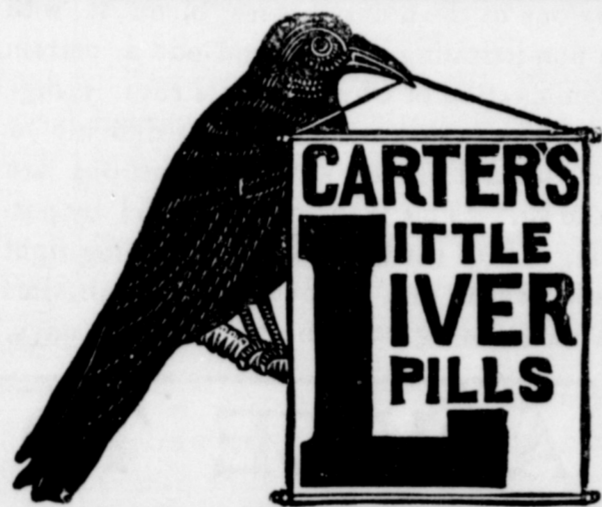
"They are bolting!" Lady Metherell exclaimed, under her breath.

"Sit still, Shirley; don't be afraid."

The girl said nothing.

She had turned very white, but showed no other sign of fear.

Hedges, trees, fields appeared to flash by, as the horses tore along on their mad career.



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They were on the level now, now downhill again.

There passed through Shirley's mind the recollection of what lay at the bottom of that hill—a sharp bend, with a broken stone wall on one side, and an ugly ditch on the other.

Lady Metherell drew her breath sharply through her teeth, and placed one hand over Shirley's.

She closed her eyes, and waited.

In a couple of minutes it was all over—the horses were down, the carriage a wreck, and the occupants flung out on the roadside.

A young man, coming from the opposite direction, was just in time to see the catastrophe, and hastened to render what assistance he could.

The coachman was already scrambling to his feet.

The blood was dripping down his face; his clothes were torn and covered with dust; but, just then, he gave no thought to his own injuries.

One horse, he could see, was badly hurt; the other lay panting, exhausted.

Lady Metherell was lying in a huddled-up position, by the wall.

She was quite motionless.

A horrible fear seized him that she was dead.

The young man who had just come up was already kneeling beside her.

The coachman walked unsteadily towards them.

"She is unconscious," the young fellow said, looking up. "We had better take her to that cottage, and get a doctor. Is the other lady hurt?"

He rose as he spoke, and went to Shirley, who was sitting up, looking very bewildered and pale; but, as he advanced, a wave of crimson swept over her face.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked, lifting his cap. "It is rather a bad accident. I fear you must be hurt."

"I don't know whether I am or not," she answered, trying not to give way to a strong inclination which had come upon her to burst into tears. "I was dreadfully frightened, and feel bruised all over, but I think that is all."

He had helped her to stand, and still stood supporting her, for she was trembling from head to foot.

She looked for Lady Metherell.

A little group of people had gathered round the spot where she lay.

"My friend," she exclaimed, in sudden alarm, "she is hurt. Oh! why did you not tell me?"

"She is stunned," he exclaimed. "I trust it is nothing more serious. We are going to take her to the cottage over there, and get a doctor at once."

Shirley waited to hear no more, but hastened to where Lady Metherell was still lying with closed eyes and ashen face.

An improvised stretcher was brought, and she was carried to the small house, standing but a few yards from where the accident had occurred.

Shirley sat beside the bed, gently chafing the nerveless hands, while waiting for the doctor.

Mr. Kemp, the woman to whom the house belonged, stood looking on, now and again making remarks, in a low, hoarse undertone, as if afraid of disturbing the quiet unconscious figure.

"The doctor be a long time, he do," she said, peeping from the little window, draped with spotless dimity. "Some un should ha' gone to Sir Martin. Dear heart, what distress he will be in! Ah, thank the Lord here he comes! It's the doctor miss. I'll bring him up."

A gig had driven up to the cottage.

Shirley heard the doctor come in, speak a few words to Mrs. Kemp, then quickly mount the stairs and enter the room.

"My dear child," he said, patting Shirley's shoulder, "this has been a nasty experience for you. Go down stairs while I attend to her ladyship."

While talking, he had quietly put her outside the door, which he closed in her face.

Mrs. Kemp was waiting for her in the tiny hall.

"Come in here, please, miss," she said, ushering the girl into a bright, pretty little sitting-room. "My gentleman has put the place at your disposal; and he said you was to drink this directly you came down. Now jist drink it off, miss, do; it'll work you a world of good."

Shirley took a few sips of the brandy-and-water, then sat down by the open window.

"I really feel all right now," she declared. "I am only terribly anxious about Lady Metherell."

"A wonder she was not killed," Mrs. Kemp said, with upraised hands. "My gentleman tells me one of the horses will have to be shot, and t'other won't be good for much."

"Poor things!" the girl said; adding: "I did not know you had let your rooms yet."

"I let them yesterday, miss," the woman answered, flitting away a speck of dust with the corner of her apron. "A artist gentleman, miss, and very nice he seems, too. He was down here a month or so back. I don't know as you ever saw him—a tall, proud-looking gentleman, and that nice and pleasant in his ways. Dear me, that's the doctor's voice."

She hurried away.

A few moments later the medical man came down.

Shirley sprang up to meet him.

"Her ladyship is regaining consciousness," he said; "but must be kept perfectly quiet. Mrs. Kemp, who knows something of nursing, will remain with her for the present, while I make arrangements with Sir Martin. She will have to remain here for some days. Now, my dear child, you had better rest till I return, and then I will drive you home."

He had gone before she had made up her mind how to act.

She stood for some moments watching the bees hovering about the flowers in the garden.

An old wicker chair was standing on the small grass-plot—a pipe lay upon it.

She turned and surveyed the room.

She knew it well—she had often been there before; but now it possessed a new interest for her.

She noticed that the old glaringly-colored prints had gone from the walls.

A few water-colours adorned them now. Some shelves, which had formerly contained an array of china and glass ornaments, were now crowded with books.

A pipe-rack and some photographs were on the mantelpiece.

She went and looked at them.

They were mostly of men or dogs; but one—the only one in a frame—was the photo of a girl.

Something like a pain went through Shirley's heart, as she held it in her hand and looked at it.

It was a delicately-vignetted profile. She was a long while scanning the little picture, then at last she returned it to its place.

"So," she thought, "that was the girl he cared for, and thought of, and worked for."

She left the room, and went into the kitchen.

She did not want to meet him.

She was sorry—very sorry—that he had come back to Coddington.

After awhile the doctor returned with Sir Martin and Gilbert Metherell.

The latter catching sight of Shirley, came into the kitchen.

He was looking rather scared.

"I say," he began, speaking in a hushed voice, "this is a nice go, isn't it? We heard you were all smashed up, and were just rushing off when Dr. Lewis arrived. He seems to think the matter is in rather a bad way. Aren't you hurt at all?"

"A few bruises," Shirley said, turning back her sleeve. "But nothing much."

He tried to take hold of her arm, but she drew away.

"Halloo!" he exclaimed, sharply, "what's up?"

"Nothing," she said, quietly, "except that I don't care to be pulled about after what I've just gone through."

"Oh, that's all right enough!" he said, in his careless off-hand way. "Only, you are looking so deuced serious. I thought there might be something else. I had better take you home now."

"Don't you want to hear how your mother is?"

She had often been struck by the extreme callousness of young Metherell towards his parents.

She noticed it more than ever that afternoon.

"I shall hear from the dad. My waiting here can do no good. I hate illness and all that sort of thing. Come along!"

"I prefer to wait. For all we know, Lady Metherell may be dying."

"I say, don't talk in that awful way," he cried. "It makes one feel bad. I honestly thought you were both done for. It gave me a bit of a turn, I can tell you."

Shirley did not speak.

She was drumming her fingers on the table, and listening—someone had just come into the cottage.

That someone, whoever it was, went into the sitting-room, then came down the passage to the kitchen.

Shirley felt a throbbing in her ears; she looked up—the artist was standing in the doorway, regarding her, his cap in his hand.

"I hope you are feeling better," he said. "Thanks," Metherell returned, in his most swaggering way. "Miss Loraine is getting over the shock. I shall take her home directly she is sufficiently recovered."

"I am only waiting," Shirley said, feeling at that moment that she positively hated Gilbert, to hear some news of Lady Metherell. "I must thank you so much for allowing me to use your room."

"Oh! are these your rooms?" Gilbert said. "I am sure it is very good of you to put them at our disposal. I fear her ladyship will be laid up here for some days."

"Indeed? I am sorry to hear it is as serious as that," the other replied, not at all put out or overcome by Metherell's lofty manner.

There followed a short silence, which the artist broke by asking Shirley if he could get her some tea.

She declined the offer.

She was anxious to get away from him at once.

She felt that he was thinking them both a couple of cads.

She thought of how she had cut him on the esplanade, and of Metherell's insolent manner.

Her cheeks were hot with the shame she felt.

"We will intrude upon you no longer," she said. "We have already put you to great inconvenience. Thank you so much for your kindness."

She made a timid gesture, as if about to hold out her hand.

He did not appear to perceive it, but, bowing with easy grace, expressed his pleasure at having been able to render them some slight service.

"Much obliged to you," Gilbert said, with a nod of the head, as he followed Shirley down the passage.

CHAPTER IX.

Lady Metherell was very ill.

No bones were broken, but it was impossible for her to be moved from Sea View Cottage just at present.

A hospital nurse had come to take care of the invalid, the doctor called daily, and everything for her comfort was sent from the Court.

She was not in any danger—it was merely a matter of time—and Gilbert, on hearing this, went off on his yachting expedition, much to Shirley's relief.

Every morning, someone went from Fairfield to inquire after Lady Metherell; but, if it was suggested that Shirley should be the one to go, she invariably made some excuse.

She was busy, or too tired, or had an engagement—anything, so long as she could escape from going to the cottage.

A week went by.

Then a message came from Lady Met-

herell, to the effect that she would like to see Shirley that afternoon.

It was impossible for her to refuse; and so, dressing herself with extra care, she mounted her bicycle and rode down to Sea View.

Every window stood wide open, the curtains swaying in the soft south breeze.

The garden lay steeped in sunshine. Bees and butterflies hovered in the balmy air.

Shirley put her bicycle against the porch, and tapped gently on the door.

The nurse came from the kitchen, and conducted her upstairs.

She found Lady Metherell lying in bed propped up with pillows.

She was looking old and worn.

Shirley was surprised to find how old she really looked.

"It is good of you to come," she said, in her quiet emotionless way. "I am growing rather weary of lying here. It is the first time I have ever been ill."

Shirley sat with her for an hour or more; then the nurse appeared with tea, and the intimation that when Miss Loraine had refreshed with a cup, the invalid would have to rest.

Now it so happened that, as Shirley descended the stairs, the artist appeared at the gate, so they met in the porch.

He lifted his cap and said "Good-afternoon."

Then he stood on one side for her to pass.

She glanced up at him.

He was not even looking at her.

And it was then, at that precise moment that she determined to make him notice her.

"You have not yet commenced that picture which you told me you would call 'M-mories,' she said, not moving from the doorway. "Have you given up the idea?"

"No; but I am waiting for the autumn. I want a dreary autumn evening."

"And what are you doing now?"

"Nothing much—a few small seascapes."