

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

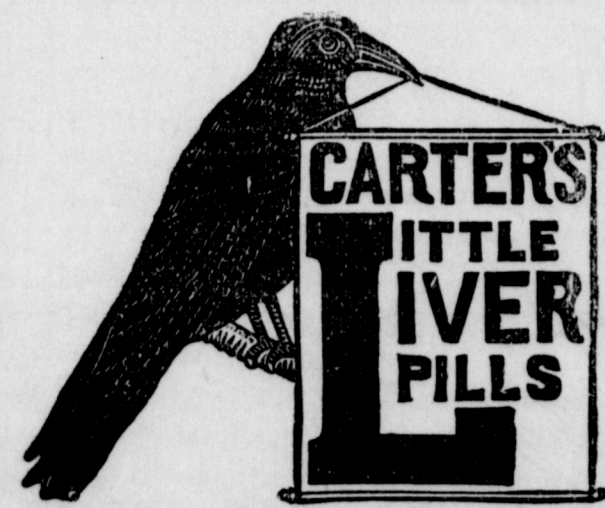
CONTINUED.

He looked at it, lying on the palm of her hand; and something his father had said, the evening before, came into his mind. He did not remember the exact words. It was just a hint that, perhaps, he had been over-hasty in choosing Shirley Lorraine—that it was possible another style of girl might have suited him better. Even as he sat looking at the ring Shirley was holding out to him, he thought of another, and mentally compared the two. Cora Rozier pleased, amused, and flattered him far more than Shirley had ever done. He had always felt rather afraid of the latter. He did not feel afraid of Cora. She was never offended; she never looked as if she despised him. He admired Shirley; but he had an uncomfortable feeling that she was above him. He did not want to live up to her. He wanted her to come down to his level. Sometimes he hated her because he failed to bring her there. "Take it," she pleaded. "Be sensible, and take it." "I don't intend to," he said. "I hurt his vanity to think she could wish him to take it." "It is too late," he went on. "We have been engaged a deuce of a time. I'm not going to be the laughing-stock of the whole county." She tossed the ring on to the tea tray with a sudden, impatient movement. "I don't care that for the county, and if you don't like to take it, you can leave it there, and it shall be sent to you." "You are a little fool," he said, angrily. "I am the most miserable girl in the whole world!" she declared, passionately; and then, to his horror and amazement, burst into tears. He had never seen anyone cry like that before. He sat staring at her, wishing she would leave off; but wishing, most of all, that he had never come to Fairfield that afternoon. "I don't think you are well," he said, awkwardly, when her sobbing began to grow less. "I'll see you to-morrow; you will think differently about things then." He stood for a moment or so with his hands in his pockets, not quite certain how to act; then he went out of the room on tiptoe, and, ringing the hall-bell for his horse, rode away. "She wasn't like this till that confounded fellow turned up," he muttered, savagely, making cruel use of his spurs. "God! if I ever have the chance of doing him an ill-turn, he had better look out! As to her, she is a little fool, and I'm about tired of it." Arriving at Metherell Court, he flung himself off his horse, and, with his shoulders humped up, and a scowl on his face, mounted the broad white steps. Sir Martin was sitting in the inner hall. A deerhound lay at his feet. A huge log was burning in the wide, old-fashioned grate. Gilbert went and stood before it. The heat drew the damp from his clothes in a steam. "Nasty weather," Sir Martin said. "You had better change, my boy." "I'm all right," was the curt answer. "You don't look it," his father remarked. "What is wrong? I—I thought you had been to see Shirley." "I have seen her. She talked a lot of stuff about breaking off our engagement. She never knows her own mind two days running." Sir Martin bent forward, and stroked the dog's head. "What was her reason for wishing such a thing?" he asked. "Oh, I don't know—thinks we are not suited to one another!" "And you agreed with her?" "No—rather not." "Take my advice, then, and do so." Gilbert gave vent to his feelings in a prolonged whistle. "What on earth has made you change?" he asked. "You hinted at something like this last night. What do you mean?" Sir Martin's lips moved, but no words came from them. Gilbert was too much engrossed with himself to notice his father's agitation, though he roughly repeated his question. The elder man cleared his throat, then said, as if he were repeating a lesson— "Is there not one under this very roof who would suit you better than Shirley Lorraine?" "Cora Rozier? Oh, she is very good fun; but, if I give up Shirley, I shan't marry anyone else!" "The girl is fond of you, Gilbert." Gilbert twisted up his scanty moustache with a conceited smile. "That isn't my fault." "And you do not care for her?" "I am not in love with her; and, if I were, a Metherell could scarcely marry a girl of absolutely no family whatever. Surely you would be the last to wish such a thing, considering the lectures I have had from you on that same subject." "I like the girl," Sir Martin said, and, leaving his seat, he went into his study. "The old fellow's mind is going," Gilbert said aloud. "He is as mad as a hatter. Well, gipsy, where have you sprung from?" Cora had suddenly appeared before him. Gilbert had an uncomfortable feeling that the French girl might have been behind one of the screens, listening to the conversation. His face went a dull red, but Cora soon put him at his ease. "Ah, you have come home at last! I have missed you terribly. Her lady-

ship is tired of poor little me. She thinks I have been here long enough, and so, alas! I must go." "You won't go this side of Christmas." "But, yes; Lady Metherell has been asking me where I intend to spend my Christmas. I have been here so long, monsieur, she began to fear I should never go. I must relieve her mind instantly. You my friend will sorrow just a little for me will you not?" She laid her hands upon his arm, and rested her cheek against him. "Why could not Shirley be like this?" he thought. "My coat is wet," he said; you will catch cold." "Do I care?" with a flash of her dark eyes. He laughed. "You are rather fond of me, Cora, aren't you?" "Ah, monsieur, no words can tell! But, there, I must say no more." He put his arm around her waist and kissed her. "You're a jolly little girl," he said. "Well, I'm going to change my things. Wait here till I come down." She promised; but, directly he had gone she flew to the study door, and, without knocking went in. Sir Martin lifted his head with a start. "What is it you require?" he asked. "A little word with you, my friend," she replied, coolly, taking a chair near to him. "I heard all that you said just now." He was not surprised. It seem to him that she was everywhere, and heard everything. He never spoke now without feeling that she was listening to each word. "You heard, then," he said, bitterly, "that I was keeping my part of the bargain." "In a half-hearted fashion—yes. But that won't suit me. It is more than a week since we came to terms, and nothing has been arranged. Lady Metherell has made several polite hints that my room will shortly be wanted. If I fail to take the hints, she may grow less polite." "What would you have me do?" he cried helplessly. "I cannot force matters." "You must. To-night it must be settled." "Impossible." "Bah! You will do as I tell you. At dinner, to-night, you will see that your son takes just a little too much. That is not a difficult task. I will manage the rest; but you must back me up. Do you comprehend?" "I am to make my boy drunk," he said in tones of deep disgust, "so that you may get him to propose to you, and then he is to be forced to keep his word. Great Heavens! what a devilish scheme!" "You are always so—so tragic," she laughed. He is very often drunk; it will be no new sensation—and, as to proposing to me well by doing so, he will save himself from disgrace and ignominy. But I would have you understand, monsieur, that to-night is the limit of my patience." "Mine is exhausted," he cried, with a sudden glare of anger and hate. "Will you leave me?" "Certainly, monsieur. I have said all I have come to say." She walked slowly from the room, pausing to look at an engraving as she went. He watched her with his teeth set hard, his whole mind and body in a tumult of frenzy and despair.

CHAPTER XVI.

Cora Rozier spoke the truth when she said that Lady Metherell had been throwing out delicate hints that her visit had lasted long enough. In the first place, she had been anxious



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to keep the girl, believing that in time she would learn from her the clue to her husband's secret. Months had passed since then, and she had gleaned one grain of knowledge. She was convinced, now, that Cora had nothing to tell, and was desirous of getting rid of her as quickly as possible. She had never liked her; being particularly straightforward and plain-spoken herself, she naturally had nothing in common with one who was exceedingly cunning, and whose ways were tortuous. Lately, too, she had awakened to the fact that Gilbert was rather too intimate with her. She knew her son was weak, and she did not trust Cora; therefore, she determined that the daily intercourse must cease without further delay. She was sitting in her boudoir, thinking of how she could manage this, when Gilbert came in, and flung himself in a chair by the window, through which the morning sun was brightly shining. Lady Metherell had never quite recovered her strength since her accident, and usually breakfasted in her room, so that this was the first occasion on which they had met that day. "You do not look very well this morning, my boy," she said, glancing at his pale face and heavy eyes. "Go for a ride—it will do you good." "Bosh!" he returned, rudely; adding, in a half-shamed way: "I say, mater, I am in the deuce of a mess—and I'm hanged if I know how to act." She was sitting at her writing-desk. She laid down the silver-mounted pen with which she had been playing, and said: "Perhaps I can help you." Metherell at once began to blurt out his story in a peevish, injured tone— "You must have noticed—anyone with an atom of sense must have noticed—that Shirley hasn't treated me particularly well lately. I have had to take no end of humbug from her, and I have not liked it, I can tell you. Yesterday she was out with that ass, West, and behaved in the most ridiculous fashion when she got home and found me waiting for her." Lady Metherell had listened in her cold calm way. "Mr. West has gone," she said. He left by the early train. We all went rather mad about him—he is so gifted and so pleasant. I should take no notice of Shirley's little outbreak—she will come to her senses now, you will see." "She insisted upon returning my ring, said she was miserable, and that she had changed her mind," Gilbert continued. "I came away in a bit of a rage, I can tell you. Perhaps, after dinner I took a little more than I ought to have taken. I wasn't drunk, but didn't care what I did; and that little French girl, Cora, came, and was awfully sweet and nice—and I—well, like a fool, I proposed to her." "Gilbert!" For once her ladyship's dignified repose was disturbed. "My dear boy, I must put this right at once." "You are mighty clever; but how?" "I shall tell Mademoiselle Rozier the simple facts of the case. You cannot be engaged to two girls at the same time. Shirley has the first claim." "Oh! has she?" with an ugly sneer. "Read that." He threw on to her desk a letter, which she opened and read. "Fairfield. "DEAR GILBERT.—I am returning your ring and presents, and trust you will forgive me for any disappointment I may have caused you. "I know that Sir Martin and Lady Metherell will feel very angry with me, but surely they will agree that I could not wrong you more than by marrying you when I do not love you. "I hope, in time, we shall be friends again; but, believe me, this letter is final. I can never be anything but a friend. "Yours very sincerely, "SHIRLEY LORRAINE." "She does not know her own mind," Lady Metherell observed, as she returned the note. "I will see her this afternoon, and talk her into a more sensible state." "What good will that do me?" Gilbert demanded, impatiently. "And I am not so sure that I want her back. It is Cora that I am thinking of." His mother laughed. "I can soon settle that young lady." "Yes; but she can get round me as easily as anything. I like her awfully, you know; but I wasn't quite prepared for this." "Even had you been prepared," Lady Metherell said emphatically, "I should never have given my consent—nor would your father have allowed such a thing." "The old chap gave me to understand that he would only be too willing," Gilbert declared. "And, when I spoke about it just now—told him I'd been a beastly fool last night—he said something about honor and keeping your word." "You were mistaken. I will see him at once." She went downstairs to her husband's study. She waited until the man had gone. Sir Martin knew what had brought her. He gathered his courage together for the fight. "Gilbert has told you of his madness last night," her ladyship began. "His madness!" Sir Martin turned his chair so that his back was to the light. "I mean the ridiculous proposal he made to Mademoiselle Rozier." "My dear Clara, the lad must please himself. I—regret it; but it cannot be helped. She seems a nice girl." "He was not sober when he asked her." "I was with him the last thing—he was sober then. No doubt, you are disappointed; but we must make the best of it. He cannot act in a dishonorable way. She is here, in this house, at your invitation, not mine. I warned you, long ago, of what might happen. It is too late now." Lady Metherell was standing, drawn to

her full height, her sallow face flushed with excitement. "You—a Metherell—to speak in this way!" she exclaimed, contemptuously. "Have you no pride? The girl shall not remain in this house another day—another hour. I will show you it is not too late to save our son—the last of the old name—from such an alliance." "We—we know nothing against her," he stammered. "She may—it is possible she may be of a good family." A derisive laugh answered him. "She!—the daughter of a common, vulgar Frenchwoman, whose past you dare not mention. Who was she? What was she—this Madame Rozier? Surely it is time now to end all secrecy." Sir Martin hesitated, while he moved his position, taking up that old attitude of his—resting his elbow on the table, and shading his eyes with his hand. He could not stand, just then, his wife's direct piercing gaze. "She was once," he said, reluctantly, "a talented singer." "And that is all you will tell me?" "That is all I have to tell." She knew he was lying; she knew also it would be useless to press him. She bit her lip and tapped her foot upon the ground. "I am busy," Sir Martin said, breaking the silence. "Is there anything more that you wish to say?" "Nothing," he laughed. "My next interview is with Mademoiselle Rozier, to arrange the hour of her departure." As she swept towards the door it opened and Cora herself appeared. Sir Martin almost groaned aloud. He felt that a crisis had arrived, and Heaven alone knew what might come of it. Lady Metherell shot a rapid glance from one to the other. Cora was smiling as if in amused surprise. "A thousand pardons!" she exclaimed. "I have intruded upon some grave discussion." "You are correct, mademoiselle," Lady Metherell said, in her coldest, haughtiest tone. "We were discussing a matter of the gravest importance; but as it concerns yourself, your intrusion on this occasion is most welcome." "But, madame, you astonish me—of me you were talking?" Is it possible?" And Cora extended her hands and opened her eyes to their widest extent. "Are you indeed so surprised, Mademoiselle Rozier, after what occurred last night?" "Last night—you have heard?" He has told you?" "My son has told me of the foolish mistake he made. It is most unpleasant for you, and you have our sincere sympathy. You would, of course, like to leave us at once?" "Madame cannot understand what has happened. Your son has proposed to me. I have accepted him." "He is already engaged." Cora gave a shrill little laugh. "That is quite off. Sir Martin, you will welcome me as your daughter-in-law?" She moved quickly forward, and stood before him. "There was an instant of breathless silence—an instant in which his thought flashed hither and thither, like some wild caged bird struggling to escape—then he spoke— "Yes; I will welcome you." The girl flashed a look of triumph at Lady Metherell, as she said— "That is right. It is now only her ladyship who is not quite agreeable; but in time— "The time will never come," Lady Metherell cried, with passionate vehemence, "when you will hear me say other than I say now—that it is impossible—that it shall never be. And remember, Mademoiselle Rozier, that my son will not marry without my consent." Cora laughed again. "I would not make too sure of that." "I am very sure of it," the elder woman retorted. "Perhaps you are not aware that the money is mine, and I can leave it to whom I please?" Cora had not been aware of it, and the unexpected intelligence was a most unpleasant shock. "But this place," she expostulated, "this big estate, he has told me it must come to him." "That is so. But, if he offends me, he will not be able to live here. My father made the money, and left it to me. I think you now understand that for you he would be a very poor catch. At what hour shall I order the carriage?"

Cora surveyed her, bitter, angry disappointment struggling in her face. "At one time," she said, "madame begged me to remain—now she would turn me out like a servant without a character. Monsieur is my friend. Will he allow it?" Sir Martin had expected the girl to turn upon him, and in her fury to shriek out her knowledge of his crime. The quietly-spoken appeal took him by surprise. For one moment he felt a great rush of thanksgiving; the next, and he saw, by the expression of her face, that it was because she had not yet given up hope, and had still another card to play. He wondered vaguely what it was; but no suspicion of the truth entered his mind. "I imagined," Lady Metherell hastened to say, "that you would feel anxious to quit the house. It appears I credited you with feeling you do not possess. Pray suit your own, and—Sir Martin's convenience." Cora watched her leave the room, pride and fierce indignation shown in every line of her upright figure. The girl shrugged her shoulders. "She has a long way to come down," she said: "but I mean to bring her down, down to her knees." "You think you can accomplish that?" Sir Martin asked, grimly. "Certainly—you will see." He leaned wearily forward in his chair resting on his hands. "My God!" he said wretchedly, "I wish I were dead." "One can always die," she told him, mockingly. "There are many ways of getting out of the world—but life is sweet." "Sweet!" he echoed, brokenly, while his inner eyes looked at the wreck and havoc of his existence. "It is not that I cling to life—but that I dread eternity." "You have good cause to dread it, my friend," she replied, with a malicious little grin. "Well, au revoir!" Gilbert was in the hall, pushing his arms into the great overcoat that the butler was holding for him. His idea had been to leave the house without seeing Cora, and not to return till she had gone. He started as she drew the portiere aside, and stood before him. "Ah! Monsieur Gilbert, going for a walk? I will come just a little way with you—that is, if you are a very good boy." "Oh, I can't swear to that!" he declared, loudly, trying to hide the discomfiture he felt at the sight of her. "My sentiments are the same as the little boy's who said to his grandmother, 'Be good, and you'll be happy; but you won't have any fun.' I say, you can't come out like that—the wind is awfully cold." "The sun is shining," Cora said; "I shall be all right." As they walked down the drive together, he began talking in hurried way about a new horse he was buying. She listened in silence for a short time, then interrupted him with an abruptness which pulled him up with a start— "We are engaged." His light eyes shifted, uneasily from hers. "I—I believe we are something of the sort." "You said you loved me. Is it possible you did not mean it—that you were mocking one so friendless as I?" "Of course I meant it," he declared. "I think you are a little darling—on my honour I do." "Your father has given his consent." "Oh, you have fairly bewitched the old chap!" "But your mother?" Cora gave an expressive shudder. "She has been trying to freeze me. She says it shall not be. Am I to go?" She linked her arm in his, and lifted her face so that he might see it. His regrets began to melt away. She was awfully pretty and jolly. Besides, it would be such a take-down for Shirley to find he had so quickly filled her place. He bent down and kissed the red lips. "I'm dashed if you shall go!" he said. "But Lady Metherell says 'Yes,'" she pouted. "I am to leave you—to never see you again. It will break my heart." "The mater may come round in time," he said, hopefully. "She is angry with me for giving up Shirley Lorraine." "But if she never comes round," as you say?" "Then, my dear little soul, we shall never get married. I dare not offend the old lady, for she has the cash, and I can't afford to lose it. Cheer up, it will all come right." They parted at the gates with very loving fashion, Cora showing an adoration which flattered young Metherell's vanity. She watched him go down the hill, then walked quickly back to the house. Lady Metherell was in her room. Her maid, a very sedate and elderly person, was helping to dress her for a drive. For, her ladyship had decided to go at once to the Lorraines' and have a talk with Shirley. She intended pointing out to the girl that she was ruining Gilbert's life and prospects; and was mentally rehearsing the scene, when a knock at the door disturbed her. It was Cora who was tapping for admittance; Cora, who very meekly requested a few words with Lady Metherell. "My dear mademoiselle," the elder woman said, without turning from the dressing-table, "it will be a waste of time. I have absolutely nothing to say, and—I am in a hurry." "I will not keep you many minutes. It will be better for you to hear me now." Lady Metherell hesitated, then sent the maid from the room. "What is it you wish to say to me?" she asked sternly. Cora seated herself on the arm of a chair. Her eyes travelled over the richly-laden

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