

## TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

The lady in question was old, and gaunt and ugly, yet growing, in her dress, an attempt at juvenility which was horribly incongruous with her appearance.

"Do look at mother!" the girl exclaimed, as her eyes travelled over the moving throng of gaily-dressed folk upon the lawn before the house. "She really grows younger every day. We used to look upon her as quite old and helpless; but she has cut off at least thirty years since Madge married. Who is the old gentleman who is dancing attendance upon her?"

"Colonel Maddison, I fancy. Will you have some more tea?"

"No, thanks; let us stroll round, and see all there is to be seen. Every moment I expect you to be snatched away from me. You have been pointed out as a celebrity, at least by a dozen times since we have been sitting here. I wish you were a man's nobody."

"You have your wish then," he said, rather gravely. "For I certainly am a nobody."

"You!" she cried, scuffling. "How can you say such a thing?"

He walked a little way in silence, then said—

"Perhaps some day I shall find out who my people are. What if they turn out to be only humble folk?"

Shirley had never thought of this. He had told her the story of his strange, lonely life, and she had shed tears of pity for his unhappy childhood; but as to what his parents might have been, she had never given a thought.

Now, as she looked at him, she smiled proudly.

"I don't think you will ever find they are humble folk," she said. "There is nothing humble about you."

"I don't think so either," he admitted. "But anyhow I cannot lay claim to any family. I don't even know what right I have to the name I bear. I am most distinctly a nobody."

"You have made a name," she said. "Surely that is better than any other."

"If you think so," he replied, "I am quite content. It is only for your sake that I give it a thought, and sometimes I have felt it would be almost better to give you up, than to risk what the future may bring."

Supposing, Shirley, that after we are married I find that the parents, who left me so strangely, had some awful reason for doing so—that it was something worse than their death which left me such a wretched lonely little child. Heaven alone knows what I fear! It is only since you have given yourself to me that I have felt these possibilities—and I have tried to imagine your feelings if you found yourself bound for life to a man whose name had been dragged in the mire."

They had reached an old stone fountain. A high, quaintly cut hedge stood between them and the smooth green lawns where tennis add croquet were in full swing.

Shirley looked at the falling water, gleaming like crystal in the sunlight.

"I cannot tell you what my feelings would be," she said. "It would be difficult to describe them. But, if it were possible for your mother to be the most awful woman on the face of the whole earth, I should not love you one jot the less. I don't often speak about my love for you," she went on, her eyes half shyly seeking his face, "because I know you cannot think it worth much. Perhaps at one time it was not; but now I don't believe anyone could love you more truly than I do. Nothing could make me change—no matter what happened, I would stand beside you till—till you ceased to want me."

"Would that ever be, do you think?" he asked, passionately. "My dear, dear little love! you make me so happy when you talk like this. I can't tell why sweet-heart, but for the last few days I have felt depressed and anxious, wondering if I had done right in asking you to share so uncertain a future as mine. I could not endure the thought of your love fading before troubles and trials which might be out of my power to prevent. But you have cleared the clouds away. I cannot doubt you, dear one, when those true eyes of yours are looking into mine."

He took her slim hands, and pressed them to his lips, then drew her into his arms, and kissed her upturned face.

"I love you," he said, in a thrilling whisper. "Oh, my own, how I love you!"

She wanted nothing more—only to hear him say that—only to feel she was nearer and dearer to him than anyone else.

Approaching steps and voices warned them that their quiet retreat was about to be invaded, and, with a last fond look at one another, they left it.

And then their hostess came up to them, introduced a man to Shirley, and carried Vivian off with her, and for the rest of the afternoon they barely caught a glimpse of one another.

But Shirley was too profoundly happy to mind that much.

It was almost sufficient joy for her to see how much her lover was sought after.

"West, the artist, is the handsomest man

I have ever seen," she heard one woman say to another.

"He is the most fascinating young fellow I have ever met," the other returned. "No wonder every woman wants him to paint her portrait."

"Is it a fact that he is engaged? These adorable creatures always are."

"I believe he is going to marry Lady Ayerst's sister."

"Really—suppose the money?"

"She hasn't a half penny, my dear. A case of her face is her fortune."

They passed on then.

"I thought it the very nicest garden-party I had ever been to in my life," Shirley said, that evening. "I never enjoyed myself more."

"Then you are easily satisfied," Madge returned. "It appeared to me horribly slow. They had asked too many people; one could not move without a crowd."

"That comes of being a beauty, Lady Ayerst," Grey observed. "I noticed your bete-noire was there in great form."

"Who was that?"

"I did not notice him—there was a great many people I did not know. Would you pass my fan? Thank you—it is such a warm night."

Dinner was over.

The windows of the drawing room stood wide open.

It was a breathless summer evening—not a leaf or flower stirred in the still, warm air.

Nearly everyone had left the house for the verandah or garden.

Captain Grey had seated himself beside Lady Ayerst.

At a short distance from them glowed the red end of a cigar.

The smoker was standing in the shadow. He had been there for some time, but had not spoken.

Madge knew who it was.

She was conscious, also, that a pair of eyes were watching her all the while.

Shirley, with her arm linked in Vivian West's, had passed in passing, to make her remark about the garden-party.

"I think Mr. Devitt one of the nicest men I know," she said. "No one can say he is anything but a gentleman."

Madge gave her little disdainful laugh. "My dear child, you know so much about him! How can you say what he is?"

The only time I ever had any conversation with him, I thought him an absolute cad."

"I don't believe anyone else ever thought him that," Shirley returned indignantly. "People always will speak well of him. I never hear anyone abuse him but you."

"You don't mean to say that I am the only person about here possessing any discrimination?"

"I don't say anything of the sort. I say you are very prejudiced. You don't like him because of his father—and the father is dead and you never knew him."

"And the son is living, and I don't want to know him. What a little silly you are, Shirley! Take her away, Vivian. It is so much too warm to argue."

After a while, Sir Henry came to the window and asked Grey to join in a game of billiard.

The younger man rose rather reluctantly, and followed his host.

Madge felt her heart beat a little quicker when he had gone. She was alone now, except for that silent watcher.

She wondered if he would speak; but a long minute slipped away, and he did not move.

She had ignored his presence for the last half hour she had been sitting there, and, for some indefinite reason, she did not want him to know that she had been aware of it.

She waited another minute or so; then, gracefully rising, she left the verandah for the garden, walking slowly, expecting every instant to hear a footstep on the gravel behind her, but it did not come, and she quickened her pace, feeling desperately angry with herself and with him, her face flushing hotly with mortification.

Why did he behave like this—why did she care? The man was a regular bear. He was hideous, too. She hated his cruel, ugly face, and would be so glad and relieved when his visit was over.

So her thoughts ran on.

It was not often that Lady Ayerst's serene content was ruffled.

She chanced to have followed a path leading to a part of the garden which had not been chosen by her friends that evening, and, finding that she met no one she began to retrace her steps.

They were probably cantering on the lake, she thought, and turned in that direction.

The sound of voices soon told her she was right.

She was near enough to hear the occasional splash of the paddles, when a dark figure crossed her path, and Lord Carborough's voice said—

"What ghost comes here?"

"I was about to make the same enquiry."

"Ah, it is your ladyship! It is some what strange for you to be wandering alone. Have you had enough of your own society, madam, and may I join you?"

"Certainly. I am going to the lake."

The Royal Heath lake was a wide stretch of water into which dipped weeping willows.

A small island rose in the centre.

It was a very pretty spot, and a very favourite one.

Little groups of people were wandering along the mossy banks, and small canoes were gliding over the smooth water, across which voices came in sweet harmony.

Someone began to sing.

Lady Ayerst and her companion paused to listen.

"That is Lucy Bredt," Madge said. "She has a very sweet voice."

"It fades to insignificance beside yours. Your ladyship does not understand the art of flattery."

"I confess I do not; therefore, I never indulge in it. Nevertheless, I should like a lesson. There is one hard and fast rule, never overdraw your praise. Take what you said just now, for instance, about my voice. I know that Miss Bredt is the superior to mine. When you made that remark I knew you were insincere. Had you said, 'I infinitely prefer yours'—"

"You foolish woman! I said what I meant—believe it or not, as you please. Do you think I should say to you anything that I did not mean?"

"Why should you be so exceptionally truthful to me?"

"That is a question it is wiser not to answer."

"I consider that reply a clever one. You are never at a loss in an emergency."

"I detect a sneer in that remark. Why?"

She turned to him with a mischievous laugh.

"That is a question it is wiser not to answer," she retorted, repeating his own words.

His eyes gleamed in the faint light as they scanned her delicate loveliness.

"You would dare to mock me?" he said, "when I am most serious. Has your ladyship never learnt that it is dangerous to play with fire?"

"There is danger in nothing, if you know how to manage the thing you choose to play with."

"Make not too sure of that, my lady. Do you think you can raise a man's strongest passions without getting scorched yourself?"

"You are over-keenly certain."

"You would have to be cold as ice to do it."

"I am."

She was feeling vaguely uneasy.

His manner, and the thinly-veiled meaning of his words, all warned her she was reading on dangerous ground.

It would have been quite possible for her to have put an end to the conversation by joining some of her friends, yet she did not do so, for this man had the power to fascinate her as none other had ever done.

"You think you are," he said. But it is possible you make a mistake."

"I know myself," she answered.

"You cannot be sure of yourself," he argued. "Some day you will love, and then, my lady, you will be no icicle."

My dear Lord Carborough, you are talking nonsense, and evidently quite overlook the fact that I have a husband."

"I overlook nothing concerning you," he replied, impressively. "You have a husband. You do not love him—he does not love you."

"Lord Carborough! How dare you talk like this?"

"Forgive me—I am but speaking the truth, and to you. What harm is there in my doing so? Do you imagine I should talk like this to anyone else? Do you think I have poor opinion of you as to believe you capable of loving a man like Henry Ayerst—an animal, with little sense and no refinement—a brute who has bought you with his vile money?"

She felt faint and frightened.

The concentrated passion of his voice seemed to be vibrating through all her nerves.

They had reached a seat beneath a clump of willows.

She leaned against it for support.

"I thought, she said, with a little catch in her breath, "that you were his friend?"

"I have betrayed him," he said, slowly, "for your sake. It lay in my power to help him through a financial difficulty, and I did so."

"It was kind of you," she said, struggling bravely to appear perfectly calm. "I, at least, am truly grateful, though I scarce know how to thank you."

"I need no thanks. All I ask, in return, is your friendship, your confidence. You have many admirers—many who, perhaps, love you; but will you remember there is one grim old soldier who would give his all to you, asking nothing in return?"

He had taken her hands, and she let them lie in her strong sinewy clasp.

"I am not offering you the adoration that such fellows as young Grey throw at your feet. What I offer you is a very different thing; but, believe me, it is very unworthy of your ladyship's acceptance."

"Believe you," she said, her fair face flushing and paling beneath the glitter of his eyes. "From to-night I shall consider you my—friend."

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I gradually became worse, until, hearing of Doan's Kidney Pills, I got a box from our druggist.

I am pleased to testify to their effectiveness in correcting the troubles from which I suffered.

Almost unconsciously she laid an emphasis on the last word.

Perhaps he noticed it, for he said—

"I ask nothing more. Let me seal the compact so, and so."

He lifted one hand and then the other to his lips.

His kisses ran like fire through her veins.

The stertid sky and the lake, with its many reflections, seemed to spin round her, and then she was walking quietly forward with him, and he was speaking of the beauty of the night.

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CHAPTER XXII.

"I don't intend to stay here another day. Never had such a duced slow time of it before, and I'll be hanged if I ever come here again."

"You are one great stupid, my dear Gilbert. As for me, I intend to stay just a little longer, just to annoy you."

Madge, who would give her ears to get rid of me. But what can she say when Sir Henry presses me to remain? She is afraid of him; she dare not refuse to do as he desires."

"I can't think what you want to stay here for. I hate the whole show," and Mr. Gilbert Metherell kicked up a tuft of grass with the toe of his shoe, his face disfigured with a peevish frown. "Anyhow, I intend to clear out to-day."

"But what excuse will you make, mon ami?"

"Hang the excuse! I've returned, irritably."

"Shocking!" Cora exclaimed, with playful reproach. She never allowed herself to be put out by anything Gilbert said or did, though at times a look would come into her eyes which suggested that at some future date she might not be quite so agreeable.

"There are so many things you can say which would sound pleasant and true. Sir Martin is lonely, for example, or the preparations for our wedding demand your attention. Dieu, how close it is!"

"Beginning to get nervous, eh?"

"Oh, Gilbert, when I adore you so! How can you say so cruel a thing?"

"I didn't say that I was getting nervous," he said, sulkily. "It is rather to late too think of backing out of it now, isn't it?"

and the light watery eyes sought hers, questioning.

She clasped her arms round his neck.

Much, much to late," she declared, emphatically. "I am glad—overjoyed that it is so much too late, for we will have such a jolly time together. You'll never have a cross look, or a dull feeling. I'll show you how to live."

"And how to spend my money," he added, rather ungraciously, shaking himself free from her embrace. And then, as if half ashamed: "You don't know who can see us—there is always someone about. I dare say we shall be happy enough. Well, I'm off now. I am going to tell the Ayersts that I can't stay a day longer."

"You will be quite polite?"

"Don't you think I know how to behave myself?" quizzically. "I shall say I've got a friend at the Court, and must go and entertain him."

"A friend! Cora repeated, with well-feigned surprise. "And who is he?"

"A fellow named Dorrien. You don't know him. He was staying with us last summer—awfully jolly chap—regular man of the world, don't you know?"

"Shall you invite him to our wedding?"

"Rather—and hope his visit will have a better ending than the last."

"Than the last! Did his visit not end well?"

"He came down for my coming of age you know. I need not say any more."

"He was there when my poor mother—"

"Yes."

"You are positive?"

"Of course I am. What do you mean?"

"Nothing; only, if he knew my dear little mother, I would like also to know him."

"I don't think he did know her any better than the rest did. She was a stranger to all of us except the dad."

"But they were staying in the same house at the same time?"

"Oh, yes; we had a host of people. Well, I'm off."

And Metherell hurried away, leaving Cora on the garden seat where he had found her, buried in a French novel.

"So, my friend, you were not in Scotland," she muttered aloud. "Why do you tell me so many lies? You said you did not know my Madame Rozier was. You only heard of the murder. What do you know about it—what do you want to hide from me? Can it be possible that you were implicated with Sir Martin; or that, like myself, you discovered his secret, and are making something out of it? We must find out, and stop your little game."

She sat open for a long while, staring at the open book, as if she was reading; but an hour went by, and the open page still bore the same numbers.

The scent of a cigar at length disturbed her thoughts.

A moment later, Sir Henry appeared upon the scene.

"Here again, as usual," he exclaimed. "How strange that we should always manage to meet in this sequestered spot! Now, you little bit of diabolism, what have you got to amuse me to-day?"

He had seated himself beside her, leaning back, and crossing his legs, while he blew a whiff of smoke from his lips.

She regarded him with a droll expression of regret.

"Ah, monsieur, there is absolutely nothing of interest! I have heard nothing—seen nothing—it is too hot for anyone to be amusing."

"Is that so? Well, and why has your dear Gilbert—mimicking her expression—'taking it into his clever head that he must go? Been quarrelling?"

"Monsieur, do I look as if I would quarrel? He has a friend who desires his company."

"What excellent taste that friend must have, mademoiselle!"

"Excellent," Cora agreed, with downcast

eyes, and so demurely, that Sir Henry gave vent to a loud laugh.

"You are a little witch?" he declared. "Gad, I wouldn't care to stand in Motherell's shoes! You'll lead him a life of it, or I am much mistaken."

"I shall inspire him with proper awe and reverence for his wife," she said, with mock dignity. "Tell me, Sir Henry, do you not think I shall make a charming Lady Metherell?"

"By Jove! yes. What a thousand pities I cannot ask you to be Lady Ayerst instead."

"Ah! we must not think of that. You have your wife. I shall have my husband, and—aiding an inch or so nearer to him—my friend—my big handsome friend, whom I adore. Is that your answer about my waist? I don't think you must be permitted to do that. Lady Ayerst might not be quite agreeable."

"What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve," Sir Henry quoted.

"Same eye might see," Cora returned, springing to her feet and standing before him, her dark eyes looking alluringly into his. "We will not risk it. I have a letter to write, so an revoir."

She kissed her hand to him and ran away.

"Men are such fools," she said to herself, slackening to a more sober pace. "I wonder, is there any man living I could not twist round and round my little finger?"

That afternoon, while Dorrien was smoking a pipe on the terrace at Metherell Court, a note was brought to him.

It had come from Royal Heath.

He knew, at once, who had written it, and an evil smile of triumph illumined his face.

"Should like to see you," the note ran. "Gilbert returns home to-night. Meet me on the cliffs, at five."

There was no signature.

Dorrien read the words twice through, then tore the paper to tiny fragments, and watched the sea breeze carry them away.

"Nothing could have been better," he said. "I felt cock sure she would play into my hands. I wonder what mischief she is up to? She is a dangerous snake, and the sooner she is crushed the better. It is very certain, if I don't make away with her she will with me. Well, she has made it easy—the snails be praised for that!"

He emptied his pipe, refilled it, and continued quietly smoking while his wicked brain worked on and on.

Sir Martin had gone for one of the long, lonely rides he was so fond of taking, and Dorrien had the afternoon to himself.

He had intended calling upon