

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

Eva Ware, who was watching her, at once grasped the facts of the case.

"Oh! do tell me who this seedy-looking individual is!" she demanded of Metherell.

"Can he be Miss Loraine's artist?"

"Possibly," Metherell drawled, trying to fix an eye glass. "Miss Loraine, is this your painter-fellow?"

Shirley pretended not to hear, entering quickly into an animated discussion with Captain Dorrien, as to the merits of a little pebble she had just picked up from the path.

Why she did it, she knew neither at the time nor afterwards; but she kept her eyes lowered until the artist had passed; then, with a quick revelation of feeling, looked eagerly to see if it was too late to bow.

"How could you cut him like that?" Eva giggled. "You should have just seen the look he gave you!"

"It was cruel of you not to give him the two shillings," said Metherell. "I must copy the cut of that coat—the hang of it is unique."

"You might do worse," Shirley said, dryly.

She was feeling furious with herself furious, too with these gay, chattering people. She told herself, with shame and remorse, that she had forced her acquaintance upon the artist, had put herself under an obligation to him, and had been behaved like this.

She had some idea of running after him, and probably would have done so—for she was one of those who act on impulse—had not his long, easy stride already carried him some distance.

"Rather a good-looking chap," Dorrien said. "Is he really the man who painted that little sketch?"

"I—I think he is," Shirley stammered. "I was not looking when he passed. Where are Miss Brend and Mr. Ridley off to?"

"A quiet stroll up Lover's Lane," Dorrien said, with a knowing smile. "I fear poor old Ridley is very hard hit."

"Why 'poor'?" Shirley questioned.

"Don't you think she cares for his devotion?" Dorrien shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a matter beyond my powers of speculation. What onlooker can tell when a woman really cares for a man? I am sorry to say, Miss Loraine, that your sex are born actresses. Shall we, too, take a turn?"

"Not up Lover's Lane," Shirley said, rising. "It is not fair to spoil sport."

"Indeed, no," he agreed.

But Shirley saw, or thought she saw, that on this occasion he would very much have liked to spoil the sport.

She did not care much for Captain Dorrien; he had very little to say for himself, and she had scarcely spoken to him before.

But this morning she had felt that Metherell was perfectly odious, and was glad to escape from his presence.

She and the captain had gone to the end of the esplanade, and were returning, when again she saw the artist coming towards them.

He was walking slowly, chatting to one of the coastguards.

When some little distance apart, their eyes met.

She was smiling, eager to atone for her past rudeness; but no answering smile appeared on the handsome, haughty face of the artist, as he slowly withdrew his gaze, and passed, without glancing again in her direction.

"You have done it this time," Dorrien remarked, twisting up his dark moustache. "That fellow never intends to give you the chance of snubbing him again."

CHAPTER V.

"Oh! Madge, don't crush my one and only decent gown. I do want to look nice to-morrow, if only to cut out Eva Ware." Madge Loraine smiled as she retold the dainty muslin dress.

"You might do that without much honour and glory," she observed.

"She has nice things," Shirley said, dropping a fan into the trunk she and her sister were packing, for Lady Metherell had invited her to spend a week at the Court, and the afternoon had been employed, in getting her wardrobe together.

"I have only seen her once; but I thought she looked rather vulgar," Madge returned, with a slight curl of her lip. The Metherells do not seem to be very particular as to the people they know."

"It is not fashionable to be particular," Shirley declared, lightly. "Blue blood is no longer thought anything of, and nobody cares even if you are not quite certain whether you had a grandmother or not."

"Don't talk like that," Madge said, rather sharply. "It is only second-rate people who speak in that way. Mr. Davitt, I am sure would agree to all you say."

"Poor Mr. Davitt! Do you know Madge, I really rather like him, and sometimes feel almost inclined to forgive him his wickedness in having sufficient money to buy Bushmead."

"He had a right to buy the place if he wanted to," the elder girl replied. "But—oh! it maddens me to think of a common man like that having our home. Some day he will bring his vulgar wife to it. She will have mother's rooms, and her garden. I cannot stay here and see that happen."

"Perhaps it never will happen," Shirley said, soothingly. "We must marry for money, and buy the place back."

Madge went on with the packing.

"It joins the Metherell estates," she said.

The pink deepened in Shirley's cheeks. Though she said nothing, she knew

what was passing in her sister's thoughts, for Gilbert Metherell's attention to herself was no secret, and she had half made up her mind to accept him, in spite of what she had said about not marrying him even if he were the last man left in the world.

The neat basket trunk had just been locked, when a carriage from Metherell Court came for Shirley.

"Enjoy yourself, darling," Mrs. Loraine who was an invalid, said, fondly embracing the girl. "You look very nice. Madge has trimmed that hat sweetly."

"I wish you were both coming," Shirley cried, regretfully. "I feel so mean, carrying off all your best garments. One thing is, I shall be constantly reminded of you. I have even taken Madge's best shoes, and her necklace with the little diamond cross."

"Well, you are not going shabby," Mrs. Loraine said, with a touch of pride.

"Good-bye, dearest."

"They are too kind to me," Shirley said to herself, as she drove away. "They give me everything. I don't deserve it. I wish I were as good as Madge."

She sat looking pensively from the open window, as the carriage passed through the village, where the tradesmen were busy erecting decorations for the morrow.

Preparations were going on everywhere. It seemed to Shirley that every few yards a small knot of men were busy over a triumphal arch of a flagstaff.

"To-morrow," she said, "poor little Codrington will be lost sight of beneath the bunting."

Then she drew her breath in a little gasp, for, on passing the churchyard, she had caught sight of a bent figure before an easel.

It was the artist.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, she stopped the carriage and alighted, and bidding the coachman drive on, walked hastily back to the churchyard gate.

She had been rude—she wanted to make amends for it.

Her heart was beating quickly as she stood beside the artist.

Her voice had a quiver in it, as she said—

"I saw you from the road. You are beginning a big picture of this view."

If he was surprised to see her, he did not show it, merely lifting his cap, and then continuing his work.

Shirley stood beside him, feeling rather small and uncomfortable.

"You were on the esplanade this morning," she began after a brief pause. "Do mixed some colour."

"Yes; I was there."

"You—you must have thought me—rather rude."

She was digging a hole in the ground with her sunshade.

"Why?"

The quiet question was more disarming than almost anything else he could have said.

"Because," she began lamely, "I—I did not see you—I never looked up to notice you. I thought, afterwards, you—you might think I—I wanted to cut you."

She watched the clever, slim fingers lay on the color.

He was putting in the sky with masterly touches.

It apparently, engrossed all his attention.

She was beginning to wonder if he was ever going to speak, when he said, quite courteously, but with a coldness that made Shirley flinch—

"It is very good of you to trouble to tell me this; but I can assure you, there is no occasion to give the matter another thought. I am used to the world and its ways, or, perhaps I should say your world, for that is as far removed from mine as the sun from the moon."

"I don't see why," he said.

"For an instant the keen grey eyes rested" on her face.

"I think," he replied, with a slight smile, "you saw it this morning."

"That was a mistake—an incident," she cried. "I don't know why I behaved like that—I was glad to know you—I was looking forward to meeting you again. Will you not pardon a rudeness which was not contemplated?"

He rose from his seat and looked down upon her.

"There is nothing to pardon," he said. "You did what was right. If I expected anything more than I received—well, I have but myself to thank for the disappointment."

"I don't know why I did it," she said again.

"Second thoughts are sometimes best," he replied gravely.

"It was not a thought at all," she declared, warmly. "I cannot explain—and you will not understand. But—I am keeping you from your work."

"Unfortunately, my work is of importance to me," he said, returning the slight bow she had given him.

Then she walked away her head erect, her lips pressed together, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

"He is a bear!" she said to herself.

"Any other man would have accepted an apology."

She glanced back as she opened the gate.

The artist had resumed his seat, and was bending over his painting.

"So clever, so handsome, and so horrid!" she ejaculated, letting the gate clash behind her. "I wish I had never met him."

Turning quickly in the direction of Metherell Court, she came face to face with

Sir Martin, who laid out a welcoming hand to her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Shirley. Are you on your way to us? I heard Lady Metherell order a carriage to be sent for you."

"I left it here," Shirley explained. "I saw a friend I wished to speak to. Have you been down in the village, Sir Martin?—everyone is busy decorating."

"Indeed," he said, with pleased smile, "that is very good of them."

He walked with her as far as the gates, then left her, saying he had business to attend to.

It was pleasant business—something to do with his son's coming of age.

His bright eyes had a smile in them as he walked proudly down the road, looking young and handsome for all his fifty years.

A woman—richly dressed—coming from the opposite direction, looked narrowly at him as he passed her.

For a moment she hesitated, then followed him.

At first he was not conscious of the steps keeping pace with his own; but, presently, they worried him, and he slackened his speed, so that the person, whoever it was, might pass him.

But, instead of doing so, she, too, altered her pace, and so still kept behind.

Then he began to walk quickly, and the steps following him grew faster too.

Suddenly, the thought came to him, that it was someone he knew, doing it for fun, and, halting abruptly, he wheeled round, to find himself face to face with the woman, who, standing still, flashed her dark eyes up to his.

"Sir Martin Metherell, I believe?"

The voice was dimly familiar, and, as he looked, the face began to glow horribly so.

"Madam, you have the advantage of me," he said.

She lifted her veil.

Look closely at me, Martin Metherell. I surely cannot have altered beyond all recognition. Ah! you know me?"

He stood as if rooted to the spot, his gaze riveted to hers, an expression of incredulous amazement overspreading his features.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "Dola Koski!"

Sir Martin knew the woman, though she had greatly altered, and for the worse.

Her face had grown coarse, her eyes had a bold insolence of expression which told something of what her life had been.

A sickening sense of disgust swept over him, and vibrated through his voice as he repeated—

"Dola Koski!"

"Now Dola Rozier," she corrected, with perfect sang-froid. "Let us walk in this direction; it looks a quiet road. And, after so long a separation, their is much for us to talk over. I was on my way to visit you."

He started.

This woman in his home!

A glare of anger came into his eyes.

"Madame Rozier," he said, haughtily, "I beg you to understand that our acquaintance ended more than twenty years ago. I have no desire to renew it."

"Perhaps not," with an expressive little foreign gesture; but I think differently, I have come to England for the express purpose of meeting you, my friend."

"I regret you should have taken so much trouble for nothing," he returned, icily. "Your presence reminds me of a time I would fain forget, therefore—"

"It is because of that time I come to you," she interrupted. "I am about to ask some small return for the service I rendered you twenty-two years ago."

"Name it," he demanded; "and end an interview which is hateful to me."

She laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Sir Martin is not over polite to an old friend. It is foolish, for the old friend, knowing the secret of his life, might turn upon him and—ruin him."

"Your price?" was the curt reply.

"Oh, you shall have it!" she declared. "It is not a very high one and will not affect your pocket. I have money—there is no need for me to weary you with the details of rather a varied career; suffice it for you to know that Monsieur Rozier has kindly left me his fortune. There is only one thing I now desire, it is the entrance to

good society; I am tired of the shady side. You understand now why I come to you— you can give me what I want."

"How?"

"By inviting me to your home—introducing me to your wife, your friends. You have a large party staying with you at present. I shall be charmed to make one of them."

"You!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "Never."

"You say that? We'll listen to the alternative; if you refuse my request I—"

"Speak!" he echoed, derisively. What harm can that do me now? That poor girl is dead; she—the child, too is dead."

"Your first wife was living when you married the present Lady Metherell; and as to the child—well, my friend, it is possible it did not die."

"I have your written statement of its death," he said. "It is worse than useless for you to attempt to blackmail me. I will have nothing to do with you; and, if you seek to harm me, I shall call upon the law to silence you."

"Say what you please," she laughed, jeeringly. "It makes no difference; you are in my power. I can fill the papers with a scandal which will electrify society. I can prove that your wife has no legal claim to that title, that your son is not your heir. Ah, you begin to see the wisdom of my words! It is better to keep me as your friend, is it not?"

"Friend!" he cried, with passionate scorn. "You have been the evil influence of my life. But for you, I might have known happiness and peace. But for you, I should have overcome the temptation of that hour, and, though I might have been poor all the days of my life, I should have been free—free from a burden which has crushed all the gladness from my existence. Can you at times feel for the luxury and ease I have bought at the cost of a life? And now, when, after long years, my lasting remorse begins to lose its bitter sting, your evil shadow falls again across my path."

Almost unwillingly, he had walked down the road she had first indicated—it led to a ruined mill.

He paused by the broken wall, and looked down in the whirling waters of the whirling stream, while an agony of recollection surged through his mind.

"You are complimentary," she said, "You speak like this, and yet you once—loved me."

"Loved you?" he said, [with biting contempt.] "I never thought of love in connection with you."

A gleam of fury came into her dark eyes; but she kept her temper under control.

"I have not come here to quarrel," she said quietly; "but simply to tell you my reason for silence. If you refuse to do as I wish I shall revenge myself by producing your rightful heir."

He seized her by the arm in a grip which hurt.

"You are a wretched woman, to utter such an intemperate falsehood! I tell you it is useless to try your tricks on me. Go—do your worst; but remember, I will also will do mine."

"You defy me?"

"I—despise you!"

There was a moment's silence, while they glared bitter hate at one another.

A sneering smile was on her lips; his were compressed with anger.

"This is your final answer?" she asked, at length.

"It is."

"You are a fool."

"I should be the most consummate fool did I do ought but thrust you from my path."

She moved her hand in one of her quick gestures.

"To-morrow I shall appear like a thunder-bolt amongst all the merry-making. To-morrow you shall see your lawful heir. An avior!"

For the first time a sickening fear came to him that, perhaps, she was speaking the truth.

That it might really lie in her power to carry out her threat.

That the child he had never seen might grow to manhood.

He tried hard to speak, but his tongue clave to his mouth; great drops of anguish stood upon his face.

Then, at length, he spoke, in a voice harsh and discordant—

"Prove this. Show me some evidence that this story is true."

She was walking away, but stopped to answer him.

"With pleasure, I have certain letters which will put an end to all doubt."

"Show them to me."

"If you name the time and place for a meeting. They are at my hotel; I did not bring them with me."

He hesitated, his mind seemed in a whirl of confusion as he vainly tried to grasp what it would mean to if him this awful thing were really true.

She tapped the ground impatiently with her foot.

"I recalled him to the immediate present."

"I will see you here at six this evening," he said, and, turning on his heel, walked rapidly away.

Dola Rozier watched his retreating figure with a malicious smile, though, as he disappeared, it faded, and a pucker grew between her brows.

"I wish I knew what had become of the boy," she muttered. "I was a fool ever to have lost sight of him, and if Martin Metherell discovers that I have done so, he may take advantage of it. Still, it is only a question of time; I must trace him in the end."

Sir Martin Metherell felt dazed by the shock of this unexpected meeting.

He walked blindly on, one thought ever repeating itself in his tortured brain—

"What if it were true! What if it were true!"

He passed through the village, where the preparations for the morrow's rejoicings were being carried on.

It seemed strange to him that he could

ever have taken any interest in the proceedings.

This nightmare of horror, which had swept down upon him, had taken the life and pleasure from everything, making it all appear a hideous mockery.

He left the village for the beach, and traversed the lonely shore, his gaze bent on the pebble-strewn sand; while his mind carried on its painful burden of thought, until it reeled beneath the terror of it all.

He was proud of his position, proud of his name; the thought of exposure was awful to him.

"Curses her! he cried aloud, lifting his haggard eyes to look across the surging sea. "At all costs she must be silenced."

As he wended his way back to the old mill, his limbs trembled, he felt faint and unstrung, and was glad to sit down while awaiting her; but when he saw her coming jauntily down the road, he stood up, bracing himself for the interview.

One glance at the bloodless face told her what he was suffering and an expression of cruel triumph illumined her own.

"You look anxious, mon ami."

"Your proofs, was his terse reply.

"You shall have them—they are here."

She opened a small bag she carried and drew out several papers. "You will excuse my not trusting them to you; but they are rather valuable. This—holding a paper she had unfolded for him to see— is a little agreement, signed by a woman in whose care I left your child."

"I agree to adopt the child Vivian West as my own, on the receipt of £30.—Signed Louisa Jubb."

"Witness, Jane Fieldwick."

"Quite simple and clear, is it not?" Madam Rozier remarked, with her insolent laugh. "This letter—displaying a thin, soiled piece of note-paper—was written a year after I told you the child was dead."

"Princess Lane, Shepherdsbush."

"Madam,—The child is doing well I am glad to say I am quite fond of him."

Yours obediently
Louisa Jubb."

"I have dozens of these," she declared; "but brought only two or three to convince you. Here is one written six years later—"

"Princess Lane, Shepherdsbush."

"Madam,—In reply to yours the child is doing well. He is a big boy now, just seven, he goes to school regular."

"Yours obediently
Louisa Jubb."

"You begin to believe, do you not?"

"There are fifteen years to account for between that letter and now," he answered.

"That is so," she replied, equably. "It is rather a long period, and changes occurred during those years. Mrs. Jubb died; here is her husband's letter—"

"Princess Lane, Shepherdsbush"

"Honored Madam,—My pore wife past way last nite, I take the liberty of araking you wot you would like done with the boy as I can no longer keep him I take the liberty of saying I think there is something wrong with the little chap he aint quite like others but my pore wife was wonderful fond of him against my wishes and I never constinted to the adopting an now as I shall be leaving the old place he must find another home. I am honored madam."

"Your respectfully
Alfred Jubb."

"In course if you made it worth while I would think about it."

Alfred Jubb was not quite the nicest man on record," Dola observed, as she folded the dirty, badly written epistle.

Metherell passed his hand across his eyes; there was a glare in them, brought there by the fierce, hot anger raging within.

There had flashed before his mental vision the lovely face of the girl who had trusted him, and whom he had driven to her death.

And the thought of her child, whom he should have protected, having been left to drag up a miserable existence with low illiterate people, drove him mad with a desperate longing to revenge himself upon the woman who had brought about this sin and misery.

His utterance was choked with fury; there was murder in his brain as he looked from his tormentor to the mill-stream.

It was deep, he knew, and the current was strong.

How easy it would be to press her back, back, until she lost her footing, and went struggling and gasping down into the waters!

They would close over her and her secret, and he would be safe.

His hands were on her, he was holding her arms as in a vice, his face awful in its tense passion.

She saw what he meant to do.

She did not struggle.

It was not the first time she had raised, and faced, a man's fierce anger.

"Would you murder me?" she asked, coolly. "Hanging would be a very ignominious death for Sir Martin Metherell. And make no mistake, my friend, you would hang for it, for there are those who know I have come here to see you, and a few inquiries would quickly bring out the whole interesting story."

She felt his grip begin to slacken.

"Devil!" he said, hoarsely, "you are not worth sinning for! Where is the boy now?"

What has become of him?"

She did not reply immediately.

They had arrived at a point where questions were becoming difficult to answer.

For, that letter from Alfred Jubb had travelled half over the world before reaching her; and even then she had not troubled to reply to it, having a bigger game on hand at the time, which engrossed all her attention.

Afterwards, when she wished to find out the boy, it was too late; Alfred Jubb had gone none knew whither, and all trace of Vivian West was lost.

"Speak!" Metherell demanded.

"Why do you wish to know?"

"Why! Because I would make some re-

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