

TO THE BITTER DREGS.

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

(Continued.)

The action was reverent though masterful. Madge knew of no other man who would have dared to touch her so, and she was not angry.

She was frightened, not so much of him, but of the moment that was ever coming nearer, when she would have to face, and grapple with, an awful temptation.

She tried to close her eyes to it. She was drifting; but she was dealt to the roar of the whirlpool close at hand.

"Spare me a moment or so," he said. "There are many things I would talk to you about, and we are for ever being interrupted."

"Can you only talk when alone?" she questioned, with ill-assumed carelessness. "On some subjects," he replied, gravely; "such as, for instance, your husband's affairs."

She moved uneasily. "I have not dared to ask about them," she said. "He tells me nothing. But he has been less irritable of late. I take that as a good sign."

"He is enjoying a snow sleep," Lord Carborough said, significantly.

She lifted wide startled eyes to his.

"What is it that you mean?"

"Only this—that at present he lives in the placid belief that all things will come right. He worries no longer; he is trusting to others to pull him through."

"He trusts to your promise," she said, faintly.

"My promise was given to you," he returned. "I was ready to do all in my power for your sake; but, when I go into his affairs, I find it would require the wealth of half a dozen such men as myself to save him. Dozen can avert the crash; it must come."

She gave a little cry, and put her hand to her head.

The jewels on her fingers flashed and gleamed.

"He will find himself penniless," Carborough continued. "I might as easily send a torrent with my hand as attempt to save his downfall."

She sank on to a chair shivering.

She felt his fingers touch her hair, and she covered lower.

He had talked so powerfully of what he could do, and it had ended in nothing.

Ruin, disgrace, lay before her; she felt she would rather die than meet it.

Her heart was full of bitterness against him. She would not let her head when he softly whispered her name.

"Madge, my queen, you refuse to listen to me; you think that I am to blame. I would give my life for you, but I cannot do what is impossible."

Then she stood up with a pitiful attempt at her old proud manner.

"This news is so unexpected, Lord Carborough. You will excuse me if I leave you, but the shock—"

"Madge," he cried, his ugly face lighting up with a smile, "why make yourself unhappy? Do you think I will allow the hideous touch of poverty to dim your beauty? All that I have is yours. I can give you far greater wealth than you have enjoyed before, and with it a love which is surely more warily of you than the British affection bestowed upon you by the man who now owns you. My love, can you hesitate? I am offering you honour, wealth, happiness, instead of the awful trial that lies before you. Madge, come to me."

He held out his hands, but she shrank away.

"Don't tempt me," she cried, with passionate pleading. "Either way means ruin."

"Not as my wife—Lady Carborough will never hear that word."

He drew her nearer to him. The tortured eyes which met his own might have touched a less selfish heart.

"Shirley!" she panted.

He laughed.

"Poor little girl, he said, 'she must make her home with us. We will take her abroad and bring the roses back to her cheeks. Where will you go my lady? The whole wide world is open to you—your slightest wish is law."

He was holding her in his arms; she felt his lips touch her forehead; the kiss seemed to scorch her—to burn into the brain. She struggled from him.

"Let me go!" she cried, wildly. "must think—oh, let me go!"

She flew like a wild thing from the hall. As she disappeared, two men entered from the other side—Sir Henry Ayerst and Ralph Devitt.

Of late Devitt had more than once visited Royal Heath, notwithstanding the haughty insolence with which Lady Ayerst invariably treated him.

"The man has no pride," she would say, with angry scorn, "or he would never come near me again. It is impossible to snub him—impossible to make him see that I object to the society of risen tradespeople."

She was indignant with Sir Henry for inviting him, declaring it was an outrage that she should be expected to entertain him.

Sir Henry, more forcibly than politely, told her not to be a fool.

He also mentioned the fact that the

house was his, and that she was only his wife, and bound to obey him.

So Devitt continued to come, an unobtrusive and unwelcome visitor.

He was more than ever unwelcome that afternoon, and the look of displeased surprise which Madge cast at him on her reappearance, ought to have annihilated him.

But the steady grey eyes never flinched from the cold, proud blue ones which, for a brief instant, were lifted to his.

His presence always annoyed her. She felt that he, this man whom she despised and ridiculed, dared to disapprove of her.

Her pride and disdain never touched him.

She had attempted more than once to put him at a disadvantage—to bring out his ill-breeding in some glaring manner which would give her an excuse for never receiving him again.

But she had never been able to shake him from his quiet courteous clam, which was worthy of any blue blooded aristocrat.

The last empty cups were being replaced on the big silver tray, when Shirley came into the hall.

She was looking rather pale and languid, but her face brightened on seeing Ralph Devitt, and her step quickened as she went towards him, causing burning jealousy in the breasts of one or two onlookers.

All that Shirley thought of was that this was the very person to help her in writing to Vivian West.

In a general move to the billiard-room she managed to whisper, hurriedly—

"Stay here, I want to speak to you."

And directly they were alone she told him of Sir Martin's dying wish.

But, unfortunately, Mr. Devitt knew no more of Vivian West's whereabouts than she did.

The artist had voluntarily lost touch with all who had known him in the days of his short prosperity.

"He must be found!" Ralph Devitt said. "You can trust me to do what I can to find him, not only for poor Sir Martin's sake, but for my own. I have never met a man I liked better than Vivian West."

"Then you, also, have not turned against him?" she said, a little huskily.

He looked down upon her in his grave, kind way.

"My friendship is not so lightly given Miss Loraine."

CHAPTER XXXII.

That night Shirley was awakened from her first deep sweet sleep, by someone coming in her room.

She started up to find Madge, candlestick in hand, standing by the bedside.

"I did not mean to wake you," she said. "I thought it possible you were not sleeping; the men—at least Henry and one or two others—are still downstairs smoking."

She sat on the edge of the bed, her long brown hair hanging down her back.

Shirley was rubbing her eyes heavily wondering what her sister had come for.

It was so unlike Madge to appear in this way—so very unlike her, that, as the younger girl became wide awake, she inquired if anything was wrong.

"Wrong!" Madge repeated with a miserable laugh. "Everything is wrong. I think we are cursed. Bad luck follows us. Look what you have gone through; but it is nothing—nothing to what lies before me."

There was no sleep left in Shirley's eyes. They were wide with horrified astonishment.

"What is it?" she cried. "Oh, Madge, what has happened?"

"Only this—Lady Ayerst stood up, and put down the candlestick—Henry has lost everything. We are beggars; we shall not have a sou left. Mother cannot even remain at Fairfield. What is to become of us? I—I think I shall go mad!"

She clasped her hands to her head, and paced the floor.

Shirley sprang out of her warm, white bed, and ran to her.

"You are dreaming!" she cried, with a sobbing in her voice. "Henry is so very, very rich. He has lost some money, it would not matter very much."

"He has lost all—all—all!" Madge repeated, as if deriving some fierce pleasure from the reiteration. "Any moment now we may hear we are penniless. There is no hope, absolutely none. We shall be jeered at, and shunned, by the very people who now toady to us. Oh! Shirley, could it be considered a sin to escape such a fate—at all costs? Would you despise and hate me if I did wrong to save not only myself, but you and mother? I haven't always been kind to you; I'm sorry, now. If I had always been very kind and sympathetic, you would find it easier to think well of me, whatever I did."

Shirley had her slender arms around her; she did not understand in the least the thoughts that were torturing her sister.

She only vaguely comprehended that some great catastrophe was about to befall them, and that Madge, whom she had never known other than placid and serene, was in desperate grief.

"Whatever you did I should believe was for the best," she declared. "I could never do anything but look up to you, and love you. I'll do anything for you, Madge. I'll marry Captain Kemp, if you like."

Lady Ayerst laid a small, hot hand on Shirley's shoulder.

"I don't know what to advise," she said, helplessly. "For your sake—for poor

mother's—and yet, if you married him, and then all you had married him for, was swept away and you had only him left! No, no! I think I would rather see you dead than going through what I am now. I wish I were dead—I wish I had died when father died."

She flung herself on a couch, and sobbed in a miserable, helpless way.

Shirley, kneeling beside her, tried to comfort her, but all in vain.

Madge was scarcely conscious of the low, soothing voice or caressing hands.

After a while she sat up, flinging back the long, loose hair that had fallen over her shoulders.

"I am frightening you to death," she said remorsefully. "But I think I should have gone mad had I not come to you. Don't think too much about what I have said. I shall be all right."

She bent down and kissed Shirley more tenderly than she had ever done before, then glided from the room.

The next morning everyone was electrified by the intelligence that Dorrien had been discovered.

Captain Kemp, so the story ran, had been the first to find the missing man, lying in the most awful condition in a cave.

He had at once given notice to the police, and Dorrien had been removed to the infirmary.

He was delirious, and quite unable to give an account of himself.

Amidst the general excitement caused by this news, Shirley's rather guilty and embarrassed manner escaped observation.

She had been one of the last to appear at the breakfast table—not because she slept late, but because she experienced a strange dread of meeting Madge.

She pictured her pale, worn and red-eyed, trying to appear as usual, and to take an interest in the buzz of conversation, which would be going on round the table.

It was almost a shock to her, when at length she made her tardy appearance, to find Madge exactly the same as usual, her eyes so bright that it was difficult to believe tears had ever dimmed them.

Shirley herself looked like a ghost.

Her face had no color in it, and there were shadows beneath her eyes, which made them look twice their usual size.

"Dorrien has been found," half a dozen voices exclaimed, as she took her place.

"He was almost starved to death."

"Evidently hiding from justice."

"Now Vivian West's name may be cleared."

Everybody had something to say.

Sir Henry was quite excited, and talked more than anyone else; and, immediately he had finished his breakfast, which consisted of a brandy-and-soda and a dry biscuit, he started off to the police-station to hear the real facts of the case.

Later in the day Captain Kemp arrived. He was the lion of the hour, and was questioned and cross-questioned until he began to get hopelessly muddled, and finally beat a hasty retreat.

He was not a clever man, and the story of the discovery had cost him some trouble to invent; however, he was rewarded for his pains by meeting Shirley as he was riding away.

He sprang from the saddle, and greeted her with outstretched hand.

"Have I managed satisfactorily?" he asked, eagerly. "I went straight to the cave after leaving you, and I have given out that I put the food and things there before going to the police-station. It is all right; no one suspects anything. It is a good thing you let me manage it, or it might have been very unpleasant if he had been discovered with your backer's clothes on his back. May I keep it as a reward for the little I have been able to do?"

"I must have dropped it," she said. "I don't want it if it pleases you to keep it."

"It pleases me!" he cried. "It will be my dearest possession."

"I am going home," she said. "It is just luncheon time. Good bye, and thank you very much."

He kept the fingers she had given him in a detaining clasp.

"Shirley," he pleaded, "cannot you say 'Yes' to what I asked you yesterday? I should have given up all hope long ago had it not been for your sister; she gave me a little encouragement. She said you cared for no one else."

"She made a mistake," Shirley replied, quietly.

"Is that so?" he said, hoarsely. "I wish I had known. Is it Rodgers, or Delmare, or—"

"It is no one here," she said, interrupting.

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him. "It is all quite hopeless. It is all over; only, I can never care for any man again. It is better and kinder to tell you the truth, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose so," he answered, rather jocosely. "Only it comes rather rough on a fellow when he hasn't expected anything of the sort."

He patted his horse's head without being conscious of the action, then he said—

"I must give up all hope then."

She thought of Madge, not as she had seen her to-day, but as she had been last night.

She thought of her mother when the crash should come.

He wondered why she hesitated. Was it because there was a chance for him? He thought so, and eagerly pressed his suit.

"I love you so well, I would be content with very little in return, if I could feel that some day you would be mine. I would be very patient, I swear I would. I would be perfectly happy if I could call you my wife, and know that no other fellow could come near you."

"You wouldn't be content," Shirley said, her blue eyes looking straight at his, "if I married you because you are rich."

"I should bless the money that had bought you."

"You would despise me."

She regarded him in questioning surprise.

"Men are so strange," she said, reflectively.

She had no idea of how naturally fascinating she was, or how lovely she looked muffled warmly in soft fur—a picture charming enough to turn any man's head.

"There is nothing strange in loving you," he declared. "I shall love you till I die."

She gave a little derisive laugh.

"You do not believe in me; time alone can prove my words. I only know that I have never cared for anyone as I care for you; and if, as you say, that other affair is hopeless, give me the chance of making you happy."

"I wish you had the power," she cried with a ring of passionate yearning in her voice. "It is so long since I was happy—I don't think it possible I can ever be happy again; but, if you really want me knowing that I do not care for you—well, I will try and make up my mind to marry you some day. Wait—as he made a hasty step forward. "I want to be quite honest, so that you may never think I tried to deceive you. My sister told me last night that Sir Henry's affairs have gone wrong in some way. They may lose all their money; it would be a terrible thing for them, and for my mother, because nearly all her income comes from them."

"She shall never feel the loss of it," he cried. "I give you my word. Your people shall be as my people; I can't say more than that."

He would have promised anything then, to have gained her consent.

He rode back to his grand new house in high spirits.

He felt that he had done a great and clever thing in winning Shirley Loraine.

She had always appeared so utterly beyond his reach.

He recalled her coldness and disdain, and laughed aloud.

She was to be his wife—his own possession as much as the horse he was riding. He would have that lovely, changing, expressive face always before him.

His heart beat fast in exultation.

He felt on friendly terms with everyone; while she, who had brought about this pleasant frame of mind, was feeling as if she was signing her own death-warrant.

"For their sakes," she said to herself, thinking of her mother and sister. "I ought to be able to make some sacrifice for them."

She tried to find an opportunity for telling Madge; but Lady Ayerst seemed never alone for two minutes at a time.

It was almost as if she avoided her young sister.

Shirley felt hurt and disappointed.

Last night Madge had appeared to prize her love, and need it; to-day she was a smiling, radiant woman of fashion.

It was hard to believe that ruin was staring her in the face; that only a few hours ago she had been sobbing despairingly.

Now a brighter colour than usual glowed in her cheeks, and she was feverishly, restlessly gay.

Shirley felt forlorn and sad, and, at the first opportunity, crept away from laughter and the merry-making, and wandered out into the grey, cheerless afternoon.

It was freezing hard, a solemn stillness reigned, and every brown leafless tree stood like a silhouette against the chilly sky.

Down in the fields some dead vegetation was slowly burning.

Shirley paused by a stile, and idly watched the smoke coil and wreath from the smouldering mass.

It was here that Vivian had told her of his love.

Across the wintry field, with its smoking pile, they had walked together through the long, green, waving grass, with the glory of summer all around them, and a great gladness in their hearts.

She laid her cheek against the cold, hard post, and all her young passionate heart cried out for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still.

"Vivian," she whispered brokenly. "My love—my love!"

The cawing of the rooks answered her, and the distant moan of the ocean.

"It could only forget," she cried, dashing the tears from her eyes. "It is so awful to go on caring like this, when—"

She changed her position, with a quick indrawn breath, as if the thought she had not expressed had hurt her.

Leaning her elbow on the rail of the stile, she rested her chin in the hollow of her hand, and continued to watch, with dreamy gaze, the rising smoke.

"If he could see them together," she said, at last, as if following a train of thought, "I might cease to care, I—"

She stopped short.

Through the drifting smoke a tall, dark figure was coming—coming slowly towards where she stood.

The light was growing dim; she could not see his face, but the outline of the broad shoulders, the proud pose of the head, the easy graceful walk—all were terribly familiar.

She longed to turn and run away, yet she remained, as if rooted to the spot.

And ever nearer he came, until he stood before her—the man she loved with every nerve of her being, the man she was ever thinking of—Vivian West.

He lifted his cap with grave courtesy.

"It is strange that I should meet you here," he said, and the low tone of his voice fell on the girl's ear with a pleasure that was akin to pain. "I came to take a last look at the place where I had known some happy days. I did not expect to see any of my old friends."

He spoke without any bitterness. If he felt it he hid it.

"I could not believe it was you," Shirley said, with a faint wonder at her power to utter so commonplace a remark when every nerve in her body seemed throbbing with a terrible mixture of joy and misery.

"I am glad to have met you," he went on. "For I am leaving England in a few days' time."

"You are going abroad?"

"I am going with my mother to Australia. It was true, then—the idle gossip she had heard at dinner."

She picked a dead twig, and snapped it in half.

"I hope you will be happy," she said.

"I hope so."

"And Cora?"

"She wishes to come also."

"You will marry out there?"

"That is an impossible thing to foretell."

"I heard of your engagement."

"Of mine! There was a slight accent of surprise in his tone; then he added: 'I heard of yours to-day. May I offer my congratulations?'"

"They will be the first I have received," she said, with a hard laugh; "I was not aware that anyone knew of it."

"I happened to see Captain Kemp at the station. I suppose he wished me to hear the news, for he confided it to a friend in a particularly loud voice. I hope your life with him will be all contentment. Now I must say good-bye. I just came up here for the sake of old memories."

She tried to speak, but in the wild havoc of her thoughts only one idea stood prominent.

He was going from her—going for ever. The wide seas would flow between them; and, far away, in a foreign land, he and Cora would dwell together!

"Wait," she cried imploringly. "I—there seems so much that I would say. 'I would like to hear of you sometimes,' she said, desperately, 'to hear that you are well and happy, and making a great name out there.'"

"You are very kind," he said coldly.