

A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER I.

In the shadiest corner of the wide rose-grown veranda that ran completely round the White House an old lady sat knitting; but the plump white fingers did not make much progress with their work. Beside her a *tête-à-tête* tea-service stood on a small round table, and a snow-white Maltese puppy, with a dark-red ribbon knotted at his throat, was sleeping peacefully on her lap.

Outside, the hot June sun shone fiercely upon all round—the wide green leaves shaven to velvet smoothness, the flower-beds flaming with geraniums, pink and scarlet; yellow calceolarias, and roses, red and creamy and white; upon freshly graveled paths and shining box borders; upon the tall trees that completely shut in the hill-side house from the dusty high-road, and upon the steep, winding carriage-drive; but it did not touch the old lady in her cozy shaded nook.

Despite her pleasant surroundings and her noticeably serene and sweet-tempered-looking face, she did not seem at the moment quite at her ease. The gray eyes, which were clear and frank as those of a girl, had a faintly troubled expression, and every now and then the pretty soft lips parted in a half-unconscious sigh.

"Poor James, it will be a trial for him!" she murmured meditatively, as she pulled the puppy's curls. "But the first painful effort over, it will be so much better and brighter for him—better for us both to have some young presence about us as we grow old. What is it, Floss?"

The last words were addressed to the puppy, who raised his head with a sharp warning yelp as a carriage drew up at the foot of the slope. In the carriage there were two ladies, of whom one alighted, and came toward the house.

"Lady Dare!" Mrs. Medwin said, with a little deepening of the faint line between her delicate brows. "What brings her here again to-day, I wonder?"

She had barely time to frame the questioning thought, certainly none to answer it, before the new-comer was vigorously shaking her hand.

"How delightfully cool you look here!" she said in deep tones, which had, like herself, been superb in their day. "The heat outside is distressing, almost unbearable; but you are so charmingly placid, it cools one only to look at you."

"I am not very excitable, certainly," Mrs. Medwin agreed, as Lady Dare dropped heavily, into a wide armed rustic chair and eagerly accepted a cup of tea.

"No; most luckily for you, you can hardly realize what a happy mortal you are—you dear, calm creature. As I often tell Crystal, when she frets and worries me, she would find life a very different and much more difficult matter if she had to travel through it encumbered with my nerves."

Mrs. Medwin pulled the dog's flossy curls in meditative silence, Lady Dare's "nerves," though firmly believed in by herself, being rather an object of derision to her friends; and, in truth, a less nervous-looking woman than the portly handsome lady whose natural depth of coloring the sun had intensified, could hardly have been found. The contrast was strong between slender Mrs. Medwin, with her mild gray eyes, silvery hair, and delicate peach-blossom skin, and Lucilla Dare, who at sixty odd had still a wild brilliant gypsy bloom and coloring. Tall and stout, with large flashing eyes, and hair that hardly showed a silver thread in all its raven blackness, with even white teeth that gleamed from between the full red lips, Lady Dare might well have passed for ten or fifteen years less than her actual age; and, although a model of physical and mental strength, the supreme ambition of her life was to be taken for a fragile and delicate invalid.

"No, there is nothing physically wrong," she would reply, when pressed too closely as to a definite complaint; "but dear Doctor Symes assures me that the whole nervous system is unstrung, and that I can hardly hope it will regain its tone this side the grave; and indeed it is hardly strange. The only wonder is that dear Annie Medwin has survived the shock; but her nerves are simply steel. Gentle and timid as she looks, she has the mental and moral fiber of a man. Ah, an exquisitely sensitive organization is a great curse."

And, being pleasantly sure of the sensation she had created, Lady Dare would bury her face in her handkerchief and revel in the thought of her own sensitiveness to her heart's content.

"Was Miss Joyce with you?" Mrs. Medwin resumed presently.

"Yes, but her head was bad, and she thought she would be better for a quiet drive."

"Poor girl, how she does suffer with her head!"

"Yes," Lady Dare agreed, setting down her cup a little crossly. She did not care for a rival invalid, and resented Crystal Joyce's perpetual headaches, as likely to attract sympathy due to herself—resented that, that is to say, as much as her real good-nature would allow. "I always tell Crystal it is entirely her own fault. If

she would only take an active interest in life, and go more into the sunshine and fresh air, instead of poring perpetually over those ridiculous old books, she would be well enough. There is nothing chronic in her case," the lady concluded, with a pathetic little sigh, that pointed the difference between Miss Joyce's case and her own.

"I thought she was looking very ill on Sunday," Mrs. Medwin said gently.

Crystal Joyce was no favorite of hers; indeed she was conscious of an instinctive shrinking distrust of the pale, wild-eyed girl who was mixed up with the saddest memories of her life, but that very consciousness made it the more a duty to defend her.

"Yes, she does look ill—thin and old and sallow—her liver is at fault, I know, and so I told her this morning—Oh, by the way, that brings me to the real object of my visit. I should not like you to hear the news from any lips but mine, because, strong as your nerves are, it must be something of a shock. I had a letter from Bruce this morning; he and Ronald Dare are coming home."

Either the news was very startling, or Mrs. Medwin's nerves did not merit Lady Dare's eulogy. Her face grew very pale, and her lips and delicate white hands trembled pathetically.

"There, I knew you would be upset; I told Crystal so!" Lady Dare went on, as though she rather resented the fulfillment of her prophecy. "Of course," I said, "my poor boy's coming will re-open the old wound and bring back the sorrowful past. It will be a terrible trial to Mrs. Medwin and me; but, for the sake both of the living and the dead, we shall find strength to go through with it, and, after all, it will be worse for Bruce than for either of us."

"Yes; it will be worse for him," the other agreed. Her momentary agitation had passed away; she was once more her quiet gentle self, though the strained, pathetic look still lingered in her eyes. "Poor Bruce—I shall be glad—yes, after the first, I shall be very glad to see him again! He can not be forever banished from his home-life and duties, even by the most crushing grief."

"Just what I say," Lady Dare returned briskly, and with brightening eyes; it is only we old folk who can afford to grieve forever; all sorrows pass away for the young—not, I am sure, that he will ever forget," she added, in an altered and apologetic tone; but Mrs. Medwin cut her short almost passionately.

"No; he can not forget. Such tragedies stamp themselves on a man's life."

"Of course they do. Still it is seven years ago now; and Ronald Dare is coming with him, and he is such a bright cheery young fellow that we shall have something like life about the old place once more. I tell Crystal that, if it were only for her sake, I should rejoice at the thought."

"And is Miss Joyce glad?"

Lady Dare shrugged her ample shoulders and wagged her handsome head, till all the golden tags and fringes that adorned her glittered.

"My dear, who can answer for Crystal's whims? I never pretend to understand her, for my part, though we have lived together like mother and daughter for the last fifteen years. When I read her the letter, she stared at me in a stupid, stolid sort of fashion, as though she did not take in its meaning; and it is so very unlike Crystal to be slow of comprehension, that I felt obliged to scold her."

"Really the words are plain enough," I said severely. "Do you not understand, Crystal, your cousins will both be here, probably by the end of the week?"

"Bruce!" she repeated, still in the silliest fashion. "Is Bruce coming home—coming here?"

"Was it not enough to make one lose all patience with the girl, my dear? I think even you would have felt a little angry. 'Both your cousins are coming,' I repeated, with displeased emphasis; 'and both will be most welcome; but Bruce, of course, is coming to stay, to take possession of his own.'"

"She bent her head over her plate, and I suppose accepted the rebuke, for she did not say any more then, nor has she alluded to the subject since, except once, when she suggested that I should call and tell you the news. I am very fond of Crystal, of course," her ladyship went on, in a faintly-complaining tone; "but she is a curiously unsympathetic person to live with, all the same. Of course he has been away a long time, and she was very young when he went; but still it does seem absurd for Crystal Joyce to be absolutely uninterested in my boy's return."

Mrs. Medwin did not answer. She thought that another feeling than indifference might keep Miss Joyce silent on the subject of Bruce Dare's home-coming, and she was a pretty shrewd observer in her quiet way. But, naturally, she kept the thought to herself, and her companion rambled on placidly.

"To be sure her head was bad—poor Crystal! She looks fearfully haggard, and pain makes us selfish, we all know, so I suppose I must forgive her. But I did feel the lack of sympathy."

"You have mine," Mrs. Medwin said, with a gentle sincerity. "It will be painful to meet poor Bruce at first—painful for him and for us; but I know it is wise and right that he should be here, and would rather hasten than delay his com-

ing. After all, it is only the first step that is difficult; we so soon get accustomed to everything."

"Do we not?" Lady Dare agreed heartily. "Though it is not every one who can take things in your serene fashion. Now I, for example—but never mind me—we must prepare for great changes in our households, you and I. When do you expect Mr. Medwin and your niece?"

"Some time to-night. James could not tell by what train; he wished to break the journey at Plymouth, but Ethel was eager to get on."

"So soon! How strange that I should hear from Bruce to-day! There is almost a coincidence in their coming."

"I see none," Mrs. Medwin answered, with unusual sharpness; something in the carelessly-spoken words jarred upon the nerves in whose existence Lady Dare did not believe. "Ethel will be here to-night; Sir Bruce Dare not until the end of the week."

"Sir Bruce Dare!" Her ladyship opened her big eyes wonderingly. "Are you going to treat my boy as a stranger, Annie Medwin?"

"No; I was hardly thinking of what I said. He could never be a stranger to me!"

"I should think not; he has suffered enough without being cut by his old friends. I am sure his first visit will be paid to you. By the way, how old is Miss Ross-Trevor?"

"Just nineteen," Mrs. Medwin answered, shrinking with a nervous distaste from the subject her visitor so persistently pursued.

"Ah, exactly poor Florrie's age!"

"Exactly," was the answer given, with a sort of patient curtness that was entirely thrown away upon Lucilla Dare.

"And as pretty?" she began interrogatively; but even Annie Medwin's patience was worn out at last, and she answered, with a sharp ring of pain in her clear tones—

"I do not know. I have not seen her since she was a little child; but then, despite the difference in their ages, she was as like my poor lost darling as—but I can not speak of her calmly even yet."

"Of course not—of course not," Lady Dare assented quickly, a good deal moved by the appeal in the broken voice and the suddenly shining eyes, but much too curious to relinquish her point altogether; "but, my dear Annie, if this likeness should exist still—if your niece should come to you as the living image of your dead daughter, what a trial it will be to your nerves and mine!"

"Yes," Mrs. Medwin agreed, with a faint smile at the last words, which were spoken with a quaint seriousness; "but we will not anticipate the shock. These childish resemblances often pass away; and it will be no more painful to see Ethel about the place than it would any other young girl."

"I hope not"—Lady Dare's lugubrious tones and mournful head-shake were hardly expressive of hope—"for with poor Bruce just back the coincidence would be too terrible. Just imagine those two meeting by chance!"

Lady Dare closed her eyes, and leaned back in her chair with a little shiver that was not wholly affected, though it was a little theatrical. As she herself would have said, with an agreeable consciousness of being the victim of a too acute sensibility, she had "allowed her vivid imagination to conjure up the scene."

Finding however, for the thousandth time, that Mrs. Medwin neither sympathized with nor attempted to follow her in her fantastic flights, she opened her eyes, after a decent interval, and said in a calm every-day tone—

"Five! Is that five o'clock striking. I wonder Crystal is not here. She promised not to be late."

"The carriage is just at the gate, I think. Yes; I see it in the drive now," Mrs. Medwin answered, shading her eyes with one delicate white hand, as much to veil her relief at the prospect of her visitor's departure as to screen them from the sun.

"Yes, here it is," Lady Dare echoed; and the two women strolled together to the top of the slope. "Now, just look at Crystal; does she not look something the wrong side of fifty, rather than just twenty eight? I never saw a girl age so in all my life!"

Lady Dare's confidential whisper was very audible. Mrs. Medwin feared that it had reached the ears of the new-comer, for she turned her head quickly. But, if she had heard the uncomplimentary remark, it brought no look of anger to the pale, sickly face.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Medwin," Crystal said, in her dull apathetic way. "No; my head is no better, thank you. Did you say 'home'?"

Lady Dare assented, and, with a profusion of nods and smiles from the elder and a listless bow from the younger woman, the carriage went on, and Mrs. Medwin was left alone, with the afternoon sun falling upon the rippling silver hair which crowned her head in such a graceful fashion.

CHAPTER II.

Crystal Joyce leaned listlessly back in her seat, until the carriage had emerged from the White-House drive and was bowling smoothly along the high-road; then any one who watched her closely might have seen a curious change come

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over the gray face, a strange sparkle of eagerness shone in the dull leaden-looking eyes.

But Crystal was comfortably sure that she was safe in Lady Dare's presence. With that self-engrossed, self-centered lady, she might drop her mask of listless indifference and let her real eagerness be seen.

"Well," she said in a husky voice, "did you tell her? What did she say?"

She leaned forward in her intense eagerness, and looked intently at the handsome face of her companion. Lady Dare, who, taking Crystal's habitual silence for granted, had just composed herself for a comfortable dose, raised her heavy lids with a start, and said, with sleepy peevishness—

"Really, you are too thoughtless, Crystal; you have made my heart beat and my nerves thrill so that I shall have no peace for the remainder of the day. What was it you asked me? I have really forgotten."

Crystal's lip curled with passionate contempt; but she turned her head aside, conscious that even Lady Dare could hardly misinterpret that expression, and only answered with sullen distinctness—

"I asked if you told Mrs. Medwin of Bruce's proposed return and how she took the news."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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