

A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"I told her, of course; and she took the news like a gentlewoman and a Christian," the other said severely. "Did you think that she would go into hysterics, or resent my poor boy's return to the scene of his great sorrow?"

Crystal did not answer, and sharper eyes than Lucilla Dare's might have found the expression of the plain pale face a little enigmatic.

"Plain" was the word that every one used in describing Crystal Joyce, though, considering that her tall, too slender figure was decidedly well-shaped and her small features were by no means inharmonious, it was difficult to account for the general verdict. Indeed, careful critics had been heard to declare, after a conscientious examination of her claims, that many women had set up, and successfully, a claim to absolute beauty with fewer natural qualifications than Miss Joyce possessed; but, though none succeeded in disproving the assertion, the general opinion remained unchanged. Crystal was emphatically a plain uninteresting girl—a girl of whom no woman condescended to be jealous, with whom no man had been known to attempt a flirtation of the mild and most meaningless kind. And, indeed, despite the regular features and shapely head, there was something repellent in the face, in the livid tint that overspread the delicate skin, and turned even the lips to an ashy gray, in the lifeless-looking eyes, which only lost their dull apathy now and then with a curiously startled and suspicious stare—a stare that made people say Crystal Joyce looked like a girl with a secret sin upon her soul.

"She sees, as I see, that it is high time for Bruce to be here," Lady Dare mused, in happy oblivion of her companion's silent absorption. "By the way, Crystal, is it not strange that Ethel Ross-Trevor should come here just at this time?"

"Very strange," Crystal replied, drawing the gray lace about her shoulders with a little shiver, though the June air was still and hot. It will seem so strange to Bruce to see a young girl about the White House, filling poor Florrie's place; for my part I can not think how the Medwins can endure it themselves."

"How old is Miss Ross-Trevor?" Crystal asked abruptly, as Lady Dare herself had asked half an hour before.

"Just over nineteen—just Florrie's age; and if, as Mrs. Medwin half expects, there should be a strong cousinly likeness between them—My dear Crystal, are you ill?"

She might well ask the question. Miss Joyce's gray face had grown a shade more ghastly, and her teeth were chattering as though with some sudden deadly chill.

"I—I think I have taken cold," she answered faintly; "it—it is cold, is it not?"

"I never knew a hotter midsummer," Lady Dare said, with decision. "You are ill, Crystal, and shall see the doctor to-night."

Miss Joyce made no protest indeed hardly seemed to hear the words, and did not speak again until they had passed through the great gates of Dareholme. Lady Dare watched the sharpened outline of her face with anxious eyes, and decided that she was really ill.

"I do not think much of her headaches. Crystal would hardly recognize herself, or be happy without them; but she is such a worn-out skeleton creature, and has such a terrible troubled look, that there must be something radically wrong," she reflected. "If it were any other girl, I should suspect some unhappy love-affair; but Crystal never had a flirtation in her life. I really believe people break down more easily under the fancied than the real troubles of life. Look at Crystal Joyce, with not a thing in the world but her own fantastic fancies to worry her, and then look at Mrs. Medwin and me."

And, cheered by the consciousness of nobly borne martyrdom, the lady of Dareholme entered the great hall, which looked larger and gloomier than ever in the fading light that streamed through the large stained-glass windows, in the center of which shone the arms of the Dares.

It was an imposing, but hardly a cheerful entrance, and this evening it seemed to Crystal Joyce's excited fancy to be shrouded in threatening gloom. She could not wait for Lady Dare's measured progress but fitted up the great staircase, and through the vaulted corridors, with nervous and feverish haste.

"I declare that girl is more uncomfortable and ghost-like than ever," Lady Dare thought vexedly. "She is not at all a fit companion for a person with shattered nerves. I shall be thankful indeed when Bruce comes home, and I shall see a reasonable person in the house."

She might have thought Crystal Joyce even stranger and more uncomfortable than she did, had she seen the quiet, listless girl enter her dressing-room, and throw herself down face forward upon the fleecy rug in a "savage" abandonment of grief.

"How shall I bear it," she moaned from time to time between her hard fearless sobs—"how shall I bear it and not betray myself—at least to him! Oh, Bruce, why

have you come back to torture yourself and me! Have you not had misery enough here, to make you prefer the most wretched corner of the earth to your own county and your father's home?"

Presently the tempestuous sobbing ceased, and she sat up. With her thick, ash-colored hair falling about her shoulders, with her dull eyes fixed in a frightened stare, and her pale lips apart, she looked as the twilight grew fainter, less like a sorrowing woman than an embodiment of grimly-brooding Fate.

A smart knock at the door roused her abruptly from her trance of pain. The fallen mask was quickly resumed, and, when the bright-eyed, cheery-checked maid entered the room with her message of inquiry, she found, in place of the stricken, haggard mourner of a moment back, a suffering invalid, whose head was little worse than usual, but who would dine with Lady Dare nevertheless.

"No, thank you," she said in her cold curt way—the way that made her as unpopular with the Dareholme servants as she was with their social superiors in the neighborhood—the way that was always so unfavorably contrasted with Lady Dare's generous "rush"—when the sympathetic Emma ventured to suggest bed and strong tea as the best remedies in her case. "Lady Dare does not care to dine alone; brush my hair quickly, please, and do not talk."

Emma obeyed both injunctions; and, when the fair thick braids had been deftly coiled upon the small head, and the maid bent forward with artistic interest to see the result of her work, her anger changed once more to pity, as she saw the gray pinched face, the heavy eyes, and the sternly-set lips reflected in the glass.

"It would be just as much use to try to dress up a corpse to look nice and cheerful as Miss Crystal!" the girl said afterward in confidential discourse down-stairs; "indeed, in her gray dress, and with that awful color of hers, she looks much more like a corpse than a living woman! If I were my lady, I should be quite nervous to have her about me. I downright lost my temper to-night, she was so proud and disagreeable; but, when I saw her face, it all vanished, and I was obliged to pity her. My belief is she is ill—almost as bad as had can be—only that pride of hers will not let her give in, or own it!"

Lady Dare came to much the same conclusion as the two women sat together over the after-dinner game of backgammon, which they played every night of their lives, the elder with the cheerful and active interest which she could take in the pleasant trifles of existence; the younger with the dull apathy of one who performs a duty for sheer duty's sake.

To-night the apathy was more pronounced than usual, and Crystal made so many blunders that Lady Dare, feeling there was but little pleasure in playing with one who took no pains not to lose, pushed away the board pettishly.

"That will do, Crystal; your thoughts are evidently not in your game. Why do you not own you are ill, child, and go to bed?"

"I would rather sit here," Crystal answered, as she packed the men and dice in their carved ivory case, and put away the board.

"Then, for goodness' sake, do something to rouse yourself and me; we shall both have the horrors if we sit staring silently at each other any more!"

"Shall I read?" Crystal asked, taking up a cretonne-covered volume. "We were about half through this, I think."

"No; it is stupid and full of horrors—murder and mystery, and such blood-curdling things. Besides, I could not fix my attention on a book. I am too excitable to-night. No, play; or, still better, sing me something, Crystal; it is so long since I have heard you sing."

Crystal's pale lips took a sudden tremor; the slender hand that held the book contracted upon it with nervous force.

"I—I can not," she said, with a sort of helpless appeal in her eyes and tone; "I have no voice."

"You mean that you have not used it lately; and that is true, my dear. I can not remember when I heard you sing last; but, indeed, there have been no pleasant sights or sounds in this house for many a long day."

Her ladyship paused with a deep sigh, which was not even faintly echoed by Crystal; then, assured that she had done her duty in the circumstance, Lady Dare went on in a more cheerful tone—

"But now that Bruce is coming back he must not find us sunk into a settled gloom. You know, Bruce always liked your singing, Crystal; you had not so fine a voice as poor dear Florrie; but, as he used to say, in songs of a certain class feeling goes for more than voice, and you have so much feeling!"

Crystal laughed—a hard jarring little laugh that made Lady Dare stare at her in a quick startled way.

"How if feeling and voice are both gone, Aunt Lucilla?" she asked, as she took her place at the piano, with what seemed to Lady Dare like defiant haste. "However, you shall judge for yourself; it would never do to disappoint Bruce if he wishes old memories revived; and, without any other preamble, without prelude of any kind, she broke into a weird irregular melody and sung, in a voice that was neither musical nor sweet, that was indeed thin, husky, and broken, but triumphed over all these defects by its passionate

feeling and wild wailing pathos, Mrs. Browning's despairing words—

"Behind no prison walls," she said, "That guard the sunshine half a mile, Are captives so unpitied— As hearts behind a smile."

You weep for those who weep," she said. "Ah, fools! I bid you pass them by. Go weep for those whose hearts have fled. What time their eyes were dry. God's pity let us pray," she said—"God's pity let us pray!"

As suddenly as she had sat down and broken into song, Crystal ceased, and rose from the piano, by which she stood, a slender upright figure, with the shaded light seeming to concentrate itself upon the fair head and shimmering gray dress.

"Thank you, my dear; I am sure you sing with as much feeling as ever, though you are a little out of practice, and I do not much care for the song. What is it called?"

"The Mask," Crystal answered quietly; "it is not a very well-worn one, though; the tragic face shows a little too plainly through."

"Ah," Lady Dare said, with a deep and significant sigh; "that is flippant criticism! If you had had a tragedy in your life, you would know that such things are not easily kept in the background of one's speech or thoughts."

"Perhaps so," agreed Crystal Joyce.

CHAPTER III.

"Ten o'clock! In half an hour more they should be here!" Mrs. Medwin said as for the twentieth time she ascended the stairs to see with her own eyes that nothing was wanting in the pretty suite of rooms that had been reopened and prepared for her niece's reception.

For the twentieth time, too, she paused at the silk hung door-way to repress the sharp rebellious pang at her heart—a "selfish pang," she called it, and took herself sternly to task; but it was one most mothers would have felt in her place, for the dainty little realm over which Ethel Ross-Trevor was henceforth to rule had hitherto been sacred to Florence Medwin's memory.

Guessing something of what it would cost his wife to see another in her dead child's place, Mr. Medwin had urged her to let the new-comer be lodged elsewhere, but, though she was grateful for his thoughtful sympathy, she still held firmly to her point.

"It is sheer selfishness to shut up the best rooms in the house, James," she said softly; "and of course they are just arranged for a young girl. I shall have more real pleasure in preparing them for Ethel than in seeing them lie forever desolate."

Mr. Medwin shrugged his shoulders. He did not profess to understand women's fancies; and though he had a very great respect for his wife's intellect, and knew her heart to be pure gold, yet, with all her excellences, she was but a woman, and, as such, naturally incomprehensible to the masculine mind.

So he allowed her, without further remonstrance, to open doors and casements, and let the summer sunshine and sweet rose-scented air find their way into the long-closed and darkened rooms.

"If she finds the task too much for her she will give it up," he decided philosophically; "and if not, well, so much the better. My poor Annie has suffered quite enough. She does not need a perpetual reminder of her grief. One night as well have a mausoleum in the house as those shut-up rooms."

And just at first Mr. Medwin's earlier prophecy seemed in a fair way to be realized. The pain of passing through the rooms that had once been bright with her young daughter's presence, of seeing on every hand the inanimate things that seemed to speak of her with more than human eloquence—the books she best loved, the songs she used to sing, the needle-work she had left unfinished—was almost more than she could bear; but a strong will lay beneath that gentle exterior. Annie Medwin simply would not relinquish the task she had set herself, and naturally it grew easier day by day, until at last, as she had herself foretold, it gave her a real if melancholy pleasure.

As she opened the door now, and stood lamp in hand gazing round the dainty nest, there was only a quiet satisfaction in her eyes. She looked from the bright fire burning in the pretty tiled grate—for, though the day had been hot, the June nights were still treacherous, and the young Australian, after her long railway journey, might well be cold, she thought—to the delicate lace hangings of the toilet-table and shell-shaped bedstead, to the great bowl of flowers on the little center table, and the deep soft couch with its comfortable cushions drawn up by the "ingle nook."

"I think she will like it," she said, stirring the fire to a brighter glow. "Poor child, the place should have all the welcoming look that we can give it, for she must feel very lonely and desolate, coming like this, a stranger to a strange land!"

The red light of the fire, reflected with double brilliancy from the shining surface of the tiles, diffused a cheery glow through the room, touching the pictures on the soft green of the walls with vivid flashes of light—touching one picture in particular, until it seemed to stand out bathed in rosy luster; and, looking at it, Mrs. Medwin almost thought it instinct with new life.

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Trembling and breathless, she drew a little nearer, and gazed upon it with a world of aching longing in the eyes that had grown pathetically dim. "Perfect love casteth out fear;" and to the mother who stood face to face with the pictured semblance of her dead child there would have been rapture, not terror, in the thought that the painted lips could stir with human speech.

But no miracle was wrought. The slender girl-figure on the canvas, with the knot of crimson roses at the breast of her white dress, stood slim and motionless as ever under the deep blue of the painted sky. The pretty girl-face, with its delicate features, its violet eyes contrasting oddly with the softly rippling blue-black hair and thick-curled jetty lashes, smiled frankly out of its heavy golden frame, as it had smiled for so many weary years, while the girl it represented moldered quietly to dust under the green turf of the village church-yard.

Mrs. Medwin turned away with a little patient sigh. Time had of course modified the first sharpness of her grief, but it was a wound that would never wholly heal, and it ached sorely to-night.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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ESTABLISHED 1889.

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