

# A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

For some seconds the two stood together in the fading daylight, looking straight into each other's eyes—each trying desperately to read the other's soul. Crystal was the first to turn away, with a little broken laugh.

"Oh—I can do nothing—nothing!" she said, below her breath; and, catching the words, Ethel, through all her indignation, was moved by a weak irreconcilable pity for her sorely troubled guest.

"What would you do, Miss Joyce?" she asked, wavering between dignity and compassion in a way that was fatal to both. "Why should you try to come between your cousin and me? Why do you hate me so?"

"Hate you? I hate you no more than I hated her—seven years ago. It is not of you I think at all, Ethel Ross-Trevor. Why will you marry Bruce? Florence Medwin loved him, but you do not."

Ethel turned red and white, and fairly gasped for breath. The sharp assertion touched the sore spot in her thoughts, the weak joint in her armor; but she was too proud and too quick of fence to show her hurt.

"It is not to you that I must defend or prove my love—that is between Bruce and me," she retorted with recovered self-possession; but Crystal went on doggedly—

"You do not love him. Ah, I have watched you closely, and I know—I know more than that! But for the barrier your own generous romantic folly has built between you, you could and would love—Ronald Dare."

Poor Ethel! She knew that the quick burning blush, the sudden rush of tears betrayed her as much to her own heart as to this merciless foe, and the knowledge stung her to such fierce bitterness of anger as she had never yet felt.

"I will listen no longer," she cried, moving rapidly toward the door and speaking in a voice that was tremulous with passion and tears. "You have no right to insult me by such a speech."

"I have the right to try to save you from the consequence of your own mad folly—and I will," Crystal answered, moving quickly in front of the angry girl, and effectually barring the way of escape. "You were, nay, you are, indignant because I accused you of caring for Ronald Dare," she went on rapidly; "yet he is a man any woman might love and love safely. Brave, frank, generous, and honest in the tear-stained haggard face, the wet and heavy eyes upraised to hers—"can I do nothing for you?" Ethel asked with real interest and sympathy now; for apart from the feeling she had shown it was impossible not to pity the woman who looked so terribly ill.

But Crystal only shook her head, and answered drearily—

"Since you will not let me save you—nothing."

To such a speech Ethel could make no answer, and there followed an uncomfortable silence, during which Miss Joyce busied herself by removing all trace of tears from her worn face, and pushing the fair hair back from her forehead; then she turned to the girl and said almost gently—

"You think I hate you, Ethel Ross-Trevor, and I hope you may always think that, may never have cause to know that I tried to be your best and truest friend."

"I am ready to think you my friend now," Ethel responded, holding out her hand frankly. "It is only natural that we should be friends, since we both love Bruce."

If her cheeks flamed over the declaration of faith, which conscience prompted her to make with a somewhat unnecessary fervor, Miss Joyce's grew a shade more ghastly, and her gray lips were compressed as in sharper pain, but she did not answer, nor touch the extended hand; she only said with harsh abruptness—

"Well, I have failed in my mission, so I had better go."

"But—Bruce," Ethel began a little confusedly, thinking of the long, lonely walk, and looking at the shadowy passion-worn creature, who seemed hardly strong enough to cross the room.

"Bruce will be here with Ronald by and by. I heard them arrange to come over after dinner; but I did not wish to meet them," Crystal said calmly. "I excused myself from the dinner-table on the plea of a bad headache because I wished to see you alone. Ronald comes to bid you all good-bye, as he leaves Dareholme to-morrow morning."

She went then as quietly as she had come, and Ethel made no effort to detain her; the last words had effectually changed the current of her thoughts, and filled her with a nervous fluttering unrest.

CHAPTER XII.

"I do call you disagreeable, Ronald; you might just as well have kept Crystal company, and amused my mother for another week or so."

Ronald Dare smiled at the quaintly-selfish speech. He and Bruce were promoting the platform of the Scantlebury

station, awaiting the train that was to take him to town.

"I have business in town, really," Ronald said, in evasive apology, "and I do not leave you companionless, Bruce."

"No, that you do not," the other answered, with startling emphasis, and that strangely fierce look of discontent that his cousin always disliked to see upon the handsome face. "I could stand my mother—but Crystal! Do you not think there is something uncanny about Crystal Joyce, Ronald?"

Captain Dare hesitated over his answer, perhaps because Bruce seemed to await it with such curiously eager interest.

"She is—a little strange sometimes," he admitted slowly, recalling, with a slight heightening of color, the occasions on which she had been rather more than "strange" in her manner to him; "but I thought at least that you and she understood one another, if you were both enigmas to the outside world."

Something in the careless words seriously displeased Bruce Dare. He frowned, and pulled savagely at his mustache, walked on rapidly, then said with impatient emphasis—

"Pray, do not couple me with a mad woman—for, let us soften down the matter as we will, that is what it really comes to. I have very little doubt in my own mind that Crystal Joyce is more or less insane."

Captain Dare opened his eyes in shocked wonder.

"Good heavens, Bruce—what a horrible idea! You should not suffer yourself to say or think such things," he said earnestly. "Crystal is ill and querulous, and a little unreasonable at times; but not more so, perhaps, than any other ailing woman. Certainly she is no more mad than you or I."

At that moment the train came in, and the business of securing a place in a smoking-carriage turned the current of their thoughts. When Captain Dare had seated himself to his satisfaction, Bruce still hung about the carriage door. Without knowing why, he was strangely unwilling to let his cousin go.

"There is no chance that you will run down again, old man?" he asked at the last, with a curiously-wistful look. Captain Dare shook his head.

"Not till I come for the all-important occasion, he answered, with creditable cheerfulness and self-control; and the reminder brought the exultant brightness back to the other's melancholy eyes.

"Oh, of course, we both rely on you for that!" he said, with a smile; and Captain Dare nodded his farewell and assent together.

He had promised to be his cousin's best man in the autumn, and he meant to keep his word, while in his inmost heart he hoped the while that it might in the meantime seem good to the War Office authorities to dispatch him to some remote spot where even the report of the marriage feast, in word and deed, he is all that the best of the old Dares could desire in a son—all that a man and gentleman should be."

Ethel's heart throbbed with a foolish pleasure at the eulogy, a pleasure that was curiously blended with sharp and stinging pain; but she suppressed all sign of either feeling—she was thoroughly on her guard now—and answered calmly—

"I have no wish to detract from Captain Dare's merits; but, as I am to marry Bruce, and not his cousin, it is perhaps as well that I should think him the best of all the Dares."

"But do you?" Crystal broke in quickly. "Ah, you can not answer that question! You can not say that Bruce, with his weak, womanish susceptibility, his restless vanity, his fierce temper, and irritable nerves, is as safe a guide and stay for any girl, as a strong, self-governed man like Ronald Dare."

"As Bruce is the man who loves, and is to marry me, and as I am well content that it should be so, the question is already answered, Miss Joyce."

"The man who loves you!" Miss Joyce echoed, with a jarring laugh. "You baby—you foolish, ignorant child! Can you only read what is set down for you in black and white—understand what is told you in the plainest words? Do you not know that Ronald loves you too?"

Ethel's face grew white to the very lips, from which there broke a frightened, half-impulsive cry; then face and throat and neck all flushed a deep burning red. There was something in Crystal's manner that seemed to give a stamp of savage truthfulness to her words; and, even so uttered, there was a cruel sweetness in them—a rapture that thrilled the listener's every sense at once with ecstasy and fear.

Cystal watched her as she drew back, hiding her shamed face with both slender hands, and there stole a faint gleam of hope into the haggard eyes, a little softness came into the voice that roused Ethel from her dangerous dreaat.

"You are angry with me for dragging forth your secret, as he was angry when I told him his," she said half dreamily; "but he was more honest and sincere than you, and did not deny what was so positively true."

"Did you ask him?" Ethel cried, trembling with indignation. "You are joking—you could not have done such a thing, Miss Joyce."

"I did—and I never jest," the other answered coldly. "When Ronald spoke

of leaving Dareholme directly your engagement was announced, I—and I alone, knew what was driving him away. He made no maudlin display of feeling; Ronald Dare would hardly wear the willow like a love-sick school-boy, even if his heart were broken; and I do not suppose it is so bad with him as that. But there was a look about his eyes and lips, when Bruce boasted about his happiness, that a child might have read—yet I did not content myself with the language of his face. I said to him—only to-day, 'Ronald, you are leaving us because you love Ethel Ross-Trevor, and you are jealous of Bruce.'"

"He started, and frowned a little, and walked on rapidly, as though he wished to get rid of me, but I was not to be shaken off, and so he saw, and said, with a faint smile—

"You are wrong, Crystal; I am not jealous of Bruce—"

"But you do care for Ethel," I put in quickly; and he bowed his head.

"Yes. Heaven knows how you have discovered this, or why you are so eager to proclaim your discovery—but you are right—I do care for her, and I pray with all my heart that Bruce may make her happy."

"I will not hear any more!" Ethel broke in passionately, the tears springing to her eyes, and her heart throbbing wildly. "It is shameful to repeat such a conversation, Miss Joyce; unfair to—Captain Dare, to Bruce, and to me."

"Shameful to try to save you while there is yet time—unfair to use every means in my power to prevent another tragedy!" Crystal cried, with moody passion. "I tell you you must not, and shall not marry Bruce!"

Ethel looked at her with eyes that were full of perplexity and pain, and as she gazed at the face so full of haggard menace, the worn frame that seemed shaken by sheer stress of feeling, as a branch might be shaken by a mighty wind, the thought that filled her mind found an unconscious utterance.

"You are—you must be mad!"

"Am I?" Crystal Joyce laughed—a laugh full of jeering bitterness and pain—a laugh that changed suddenly to a less painful sob, as she cried, "Oh, that I were mad—that I had been all these years!"

She covered her face with her hands, and for a few seconds the silence was broken only by her gasping breath. Ethel witnessed the astonishing display with quite as much wonder as compassion in her thoughts. That Crystal Joyce, the hard, cold, repellent, self-contained woman, who seemed to hold the whole world at arm's length with defiant scorn, could weep, was a discovery to her; that she should be here pouring out her whole heart like a grieved and passionate child in a stranger's presence was little short of a miracle.

"Miss Joyce," she said at last, touching the bent head with timid gentleness—it seemed a venturesome thing to do, for she half expected her fierce guest to turn upon her with some fresh show of savage vehemence; but there was not even anger tivities could reach him only after a healing interval of time. As Crystal had said, the young soldier wore his willow with a gallant grace; but it was a willow all the same.

Bruce stood watching the train out of the station till the last faint silvery wreath of smoke had faded from the deep blue sky; then, with a little impatient shoulder-shrug, he went back to the dog-cart, and drove home.

The rest of the day passed heavily and drearily to Bruce; he shut himself up in the study under the pretense that he had letters to write, and so avoided his mother and Crystal until the dinner-hour—a piece of impoliteness for which the former freely rated him during the progress of the meal.

"One would think that, with Ronald gone, you could have spared a few seconds to us," she said, in an aggrieved tone, as she rose from the table, "but you avoid us as though we were ogres, Bruce."

"I have been busy," he answered impatiently, knowing all the time that the impatience was provoked much less by his mother's rambling reproach than by Crystal Joyce's watchful unwavering look.

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"And now we shall see no more of you, for of course you will go straight over to the White House. Fortunately we are accustomed to our own company, Crystal and I."

Bruce glanced half apprehensively at his cousin, but her pale face was perfectly emotionless—indeed, she hardly seemed to be attending to the conversation—and she passed out with Lady Dare without looking back.

But ten minutes later, when the young man stood on the terrace walk, with a cigar ready for lighting in his hand, and his soft felt hat drawn low over his eyes Miss Joyce came gliding through the open French window, looking more weirdly uncanny than ever in the black-lace dress that contrasted so with her white face and pale yellow hair.

Bruce muttered a savage word or two between his teeth. No goblin-specter could have been more unwelcome than she was then; but for reasons best known to himself he was always particularly conciliatory to her, and he made a strong effort to conceal his annoyance now.

"Taking a moonlight stroll, Crystal?" he said lightly. "You must miss Ronald now."

"You are going to the White House?" she questioned, ignoring the frivolous remark, and fixing her gleaming eyes upon his face.

"Yes, and I have no time to waste; for the Medwins are devotees of the 'early to bed and early to rise' creed, you know."

"Nevertheless, they can wait if they are to see you to-night, for I must speak to you before you go, Bruce."

Bruce's handsome face grew for a moment almost as ghastly as her own, and the dark eyes glittered angrily beneath the brim of the soft hat; then the color came back in a hot flush, and he answered, with a laugh that sounded forced and unreal—

"Must"—most absolute lady! Then you must be brief, too, for I really have not a second to spare."

"Yet what I have to say will take many seconds, and more than seconds," Crystal rejoined calmly. "Bruce, I have waited patiently for this chance of speaking to you. I have thought and thought until my senses have almost deserted me, and if I do not speak to-night, I shall be the most wicked of cowards."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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The girl looked at her a minute as though pitying her ignorance, and then answered: "You canna coort right walking; you must sit doon."

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