

A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

"He will know me if he wakes," she said with a calm gentleness that was utterly unlike her usual manner, and yet with a determined purpose they all felt it would be vain to try to shake. "And, if he does not—"

"As is most probable," Doctor Clayden put in, bending over the unconscious man and raising one of the heavy eyelids with his finger and thumb. "I hardly think he will wake to consciousness again."

Ronald, who stood a little nearer to the pale girl, thought he caught a hurried passionate, "Best so!"—but, aloud, she only answered gently—

"Even so, I can nurse him to the end—I have nursed him before."

They both knew that—knew that, through the long fever and delirium following Florence Medwin's death, Lady Dare had been nominally, but Crystal Joyce really, his nurse, and both shuddered at the recollection now.

"Dare," said the doctor abruptly, as soon as the men were alone, "there is one thing quite clear to me now—that girl knows, and has known all along."

There was something of sternness in the doctor's manner—but only a passionate pity in Ronald Dare's kind eyes.

"Poor Crystal—if so, hers has been a martyrdom indeed!" he said below his breath; and then, unwilling to continue the discussion, and feeling that sooner or later his hard task must be performed, he went out to the White House.

Here he saw only Ethel, who came down from her aunt's room to receive him. Her face was so white, her eyes, as they imploringly sought his, so full of helpless, hopeless terror, that the young man could with difficulty keep the words of love and tenderness back from his lips, restrain himself from folding the slender figure in his strong arms, and bidding the girl pour out the tears that must relieve her on his true and aching heart.

But the young soldier was proudly loyal in face of all temptation, and never was Bruce Dare in less danger of betrayal than when he lay crushed, helpless, and utterly at the mercy of the man whose dream of love he had destroyed.

So when Ethel came toward him, with both white hands extended, and with the piteous cry—"Oh, Captain Dare, where is Bruce—what does it all mean?"—he just touched and let the nerveless fingers drop, and kept all dangerous tenderness from his voice and eyes as he answered gravely—

"Bruce is at the Rectory, and at the point of death, they tell me."

"Death?" she repeated in a frightened whisper; and then he saw what he might have guessed before, that in all the assembly Bruce Dare's promised wife was the one person who had seen and known nothing of the accident.

"Sit down," he said, leading her to the nearest chair, and seeing that but for that support she must have fallen.

When she had somewhat recovered from the first shock, he told her gently and briefly all that had taken place, adding, as she drew a long sobbing breath, and covered her face with both hands—

"It was best for you to know, you must have heard soon; but perhaps not until—"

"Until it was too late," she finished, with a sob. "Oh, yes—you were kind to tell me—kind to come! He might have died, and—I—oh!"—she rose with a quick convulsive shiver—"I must go to him at once!"

He hesitated, his brows contracting in a painful perplexity. That she should go to the dying man, and be with him during the brief remainder of his life, was his own strong wish, and yet—

"Your aunt, your uncle—will they not object?" he asked abruptly; and Ethel regarded him with half-bewildered, half-appealing eyes.

"I do not know," she replied, with a little choking sob; "I only know that Bruce is dying, and I must go to him. Oh, take me now!"

Ronald could say no more, and she would have listened to no arguments just then; so ten minutes later Crystal Joyce—kneeling by the bedside of the dying man, pouring out her whole soul in a wild prayer that the life that was dearest in the world to her might end with out another pang—felt a touch upon her shoulder, and, raising her heavy eyes, saw Ethel standing by her side.

The girl looked pale and shadowy enough in the uncertain light to be the spirit Crystal thought her, as she rose quickly to her feet with a little shuddering cry of terror and dismay.

"You here," she gasped—"you? Oh!"—with a faint smile at her own fear—"I remember now—you are Ethel Ross-Trevor!"

"Yes," Ethel responded, too agitated to notice the curious change in her manner, "I did not know—until Captain Dare told me—Oh, Crystal—how is Bruce?"

"Dying," Crystal answered quietly. "No, do not weep, child—Heaven has been most merciful to you—and to him." But Ethel had crossed to the other side

of the bed, and was bending over the pillow—her tears falling fast upon the marble-like face, upturned so placidly to her gaze.

She had not loved Bruce Dare as a woman should love the man with whom her life is to be spent; she knew that now—had long known that she had bartered all hope of true happiness for a romantic dream of self-sacrifice, but none the less was her heart wrung with a passionate pity—a painful sense of loss. At that moment she would have given life itself to see him as he was but four and twenty hours back, when he lingered with her at the garden gate, bidding her pray not that she might make him happy, but that she might be safe and happy with him.

The remembrance was like a knife thrust in her heart—she heard the soft, musical voice with torturing distinctness; she saw with cruel vividness the eager, handsome face and shining love-lit eyes; and then her glance fell upon the closed eyelids and the rigid lips, and all the anguish of her thoughts found vent in the exceeding bitter cry—

"Oh, Bruce—poor Bruce! If I had only known!"

There must have been some strange magnetic power in the sound, for it reached the dulled ears of the dying man. The pale face quivered—a faint breath struggled through the gray, parted lips, and slowly the heavy eyes opened, and rested on Ethel's face.

"Crystal!" the girl cried, trembling in an ecstasy of terror and delight; and Crystal came quickly to her side.

But the dying man had neither look nor thought for her—his every faculty seemed concentrated in that one longing, intense gaze—the look that was half-rapture and half-anguish.

"Florence!" he said in an imploring whisper; and when Ethel would have spoken, she felt Crystal's thin hand tighten vice-like on her shoulder, and caught the harsh sound that was less an entreaty than a command—

"Do not deceive him—let him die happy—taking you for—the dead."

"Florence," the low, entreating voice went on—"have you come back to me—come back from the dead? Say you forgive me—Florence—before I die!"

"Say you forgive him!" Crystal repeated, in the same harsh whisper; and Ethel, half wild with pain and terror, faltered out—

"Oh, Bruce, dear Bruce—Heaven knows that I forgive you—whatever your sins may be!"

For the last time the gray eyes brightened with their old radiance—the lips quivered with a passionate joy; Bruce made one desperate effort to raise himself upon the pillow—uttered a broken murmur, in which there was no note of pain—and fell back—dead!

CHAPTER XVII.

"And you knew this all these years?" Ronald Dare said bitterly.

Crystal Joyce, standing grave, pale and quiet by the table that was as a barrier between them, echoed the words in a half-dreamy fashion.

"Yes, I knew it all these years."

"And never thought of speaking, made no attempt to save Miss Ross-Trevor from what might have been her cousin's fate?"

The young man's face grew very white and stern as he uttered the last sentence, and the hand resting on the tall chair-back trembled violently. Crystal looked at him with curious, half-compassionate, half-scornful interest. How could he care so much about anything, now that Bruce was dead? The world had come to a standstill for her; it was hardly possible to understand it revolved for others.

"You are wrong," she said, with a tired little sigh. "As your own memory should tell you; did I not beg you to win Ethel Ross-Trevor for yourself; tell you that her love was truly yours; that she had only a romantic pity for Bruce? Did I not tell the foolish, frightened creature her own secret and yours, and try to save her against her will? But you were all against me, and now the end has come."

There was a dull hopeless agony in the low tone that went to Ronald Dare's kind heart, and did battle with his just and honest indignation. It was horrible to think of the girl he loved betrayed to what might have been a tragic fate. But Ethel was safe, and, looking at Crystal Joyce's haggard, patient misery, he could afford to pity her.

"Crystal," he said gently, after a few moments' pause, during which he had paced the room in troubled thought, and she stood in listless patience awaiting his pleasure, "Heaven knows I pity you, Heaven knows I would spare you if I could."

The words seemed to hurt her as no reproaches could have done. The tears rose in her eyes.

"Do not," she cried, showing signs of agitation for the first time in the interview, for the first time since Bruce's death—"Do not, Ronald! No one has ever pitied or spared me all these years. I could not bear it now. Save all your pity for Bruce."

"For him?" the young man echoed with a shudder; and she went on with restored calm—

"Yes, for he was mad, and no more responsible for the acts of his madness than you and I are for the dreams that visit us in our sleep, Ronald." She raised her

dim eyes entreatingly to his. "May I tell you, and you only, the story of—of Bruce's sin?"

"Yes. I wish to know how much may be buried in our own hearts, how far we may shield his memory," Ronald put in quickly.

"His own wild words are as yet the only witnesses against him, and even when they were heard I doubt if they were understood. Unbacked by Gustave Ducloz's confession, they have no convincing force."

"None," Crystal said, with a long sigh of relief.

She took the chair Ronald drew forward for her, and sat for a few minutes trying to collect, or rather to arrange her thoughts; but the effort was wasted, for, after all, she dashed straight into the heart of her story when she did begin:

"I always knew that Bruce was queer, uncertain, irritable, and eccentric, and I knew, too, that on his mother's side he had mad blood—mad gypsy blood in his veins, for her mother cut his throat in what his friends charitably called brain fever. But I never thought of associating the two facts that held distinct places in my mind. Lady Dare was queer, too, in a rambling feather-headed flighty fashion that was far more trying to me than her son's occasional fits of temper; but I no more thought that the family curse had descended upon the one than upon the other—both were peculiar, neither was mad."

"And then, I loved Bruce—yes," she declared, with the faint shadow of a smile, as she met Ronald's startled gaze—"loved him as girl and woman, in spite of all—through all—as I have loved no one else in all my life, as no one else ever loved him—without hope and without return, but faithfully to the end. Why do I tell you this now? Well, partly to explain my conduct, partly to delay that portion of my story on which it is agony to dwell."

"When we came back to Dareholme seven years ago—when he made Florence Medwin's acquaintance, and almost at first sight fell in love with her—it seemed to me that I first began to notice that he was not quite like other men. Perhaps jealousy sharpened my eyes, and the keen pain I lived through at that time made me irritable and suspicious; but I fancied that his transports of hope and fear, his raptures and agonies, were somewhat extravagant. But no one else shared my doubts and fears—at least Aunt Lucilla, Mr. Medwin, and Florence herself were thoroughly content; and, if Mrs. Medwin seemed at times a little uneasy—she was very fond of Bruce—she evidently thought her apprehensions were groundless and fanciful."

"So all things went on quietly till the eve of the wedding-day, and then—"

Crystal paused, shuddering and growing so deathly pale at the remembrance that Ronald, thinking she would faint, poured out and brought her a glass of water; but she waved it impatiently away.

"No—no, let me finish," she said, between her teeth. "That evening—shall I ever forget it—I sat alone in the little morning-room, crying, Ronald—crying for what I thought misery then. It seemed to me so terrible a thing that I must stand by and see Bruce Dare and Florence Medwin joined together as man and wife. Good heavens, if I had only known, I should have considered that sight the best and brightest my eyes could look upon! I was alone in the house as it happened, for Aunt Lucilla had driven over to the White House to arrange some point for the morrow's ceremony, and see Florence in her bridal dress. She had pressed me to accompany her, and I somewhat sullenly refused. How thankful—oh, how thankful I have been for that refusal since then; though then I only thought it left me free to indulge my morbid grief!"

"Suddenly, as I sat sobbing in the dim half-light, a step sounded in the veranda, a shadow fell across me, and when I raised my dim swollen eyes, they rested on Bruce."

"Bruce! Was it Bruce? For the moment a superstitious terror held me fast. I thought, as I gazed upon the drawn white face, the madly-blazing eyes, that Bruce had died in some strange and horrible fashion, and this was his tortured spirit. Perhaps the thought showed plainly in my face, for he suddenly broke into a wild laugh—the laugh you heard in church, Ronald."

"I am flesh and blood; the happy bridegroom in person, Crystal. Touch my hand. Is that a ghost's?"

"He stretched it out as in desperate mockery. As he did so, the light fell upon something that shone with a thousand sparkling reflections. I bent forward to examine it more closely. Dangling from the top button of his coat was a slender gold chain from which there hung a heart-shaped locket, thickly set with precious stones."

"All the blood in my body seemed to rush to my head, as I snatched the locket away in a very madness of terror. I knew it well; it bore Bruce's and Florence Medwin's initials entwined in brilliant, had been his gift to her, and since their engagement she had always worn it at her neck. How came it here now?"

"Bruce," I cried, trembling so violently that I could hardly articulate, "where is Florence? What does this mean?" "He stared at me and then at the locket

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and put his hand to his head. A curious film seemed to be gathering over his eyes, and a dull stupid look replaced the fierce excited gaze of a moment back. I had seen the same dull apathy succeed his furious outbursts before now, and knew that, for an hour or so, he would be docile and manageable as a child.

"Heaven knows what instinct warned me to manage him—to ask no more questions, to hide away the chain and locket, as though they would convict me of some hideous crime, to assume a forced cheerfulness and brisk command of the situation; but it was as strong as subtle, and I obeyed it at once."

"You are tired, Bruce," I said, as he dropped heavily into the chair, and sat staring before him with that dull dreadful gaze. "We will have tea together here. I shall never have you tête-à-tête again."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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