

# A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

He turned at the corner of the lane to wave her a last farewell. The moon rising in full splendor over the tops of the tall trees shed her white luster upon the slight figure and the handsome face, which was radiantly bright for once. The picture photographed itself on the girl's brain as something she was destined never to forget. She stood just where he had left her for fully ten minutes, with a wistful troubled look in her great eyes.

"I wish Captain Dare had gone with him," she murmured, with a nervous little laugh; but Captain Dare's voice reached her at that moment, and, as the last thing she desired was a *à-tête* with him, she hurried back to the house.

In the meantime Bruce walked on with a quick swinging step. The strange half-fierce foreboding that had oppressed him in Ethel's presence had wholly passed away, he was absolutely and unquestionably happy, troubled by no remembrance of the cruel past, no dread of the unknown future, absorbed in his present bliss.

He was humming a light French valse-tune gayly as he passed through the lodge-gate and into the great avenue, but he had not gone half a dozen steps before the gay melody died on his lips, and he stopped abruptly, while the great drops of a mortal agony gathered on his brow.

Slowly through the trees there came toward him a slender female figure, with a dark veil thrown over its head. Nearer and still nearer it came, until it put out a cold thin hand as though to touch him, when he drew back with a broken cry.

"Florence! Oh, Heaven pity me!" "No, no—no Florence!" a familiar voice said hurriedly, and the dark wrapping was flung back quickly, revealing nothing more spiritual or unearthly than Crystal Joyce's pale-gold hair and haggard face. "Bruce, dear Bruce, do you not know me? I never thought that I had hidden my face."

Yes, Bruce knew her, and the mad helpless terror died out of his eyes, leaving a sullen anger in its place. The shock had been severe, and he resented it fiercely.

"Yes, I know you," he replied, looking away, as though her face were almost as unwelcome a sight as that he had at first feared to look upon. "So you have come back, Crystal, after all?"

"Yes," she responded humbly; "I did not mean to come until—until the wedding was over, but something stronger than my will drew me back to Darholme."

"May I ask if you come back as friend or foe?" he questioned coldly.

She looked at him for a moment reproachfully, then answered, with a sigh—

"I could not be your foe, Bruce, though Heaven knows I have not been your true friend; but you need fear neither argument nor opposition from me. I have been waiting and watching to tell you that—to tell you that I give in, and own myself beaten by fate."

She looked incapable of any exertion—a fragile creature, powerless for good or ill, and overwhelmed by an adverse fate. The picture was neither pleasant nor inspiring, yet Bruce's face brightened as he gazed upon her.

"Now I know you. Now you are my old kind Crystal," he said, in a low caressing voice; and, drawing a little nearer, he took within his own thin cold hand that hung listlessly by the woman's side.

"And you are really happy, Bruce?" she asked, in a low eager tone, and with wonder in her eyes.

"Quite happy now!" was the emphatic answer, "As happy as I mean to make my wife, as happy as I should like to see you, Crystal!"

The pale lips quivered painfully, the woe deepened in the haggard eyes, but Crystal only said doggedly—

"Then I am satisfied."

"And was not my mother glad to see you? Did you give her as fine a fright as you did me?" Bruce asked, in a lighter tone, as they drew near the house.

"Yes, she was very glad, Bruce." She laid her hand upon his arm. "I am breaking my vow—I am here to see you happy in your own fashion."

"And I could and would be happy in no other," he broke in, with harsh abruptness. "Crystal, have you come here to renew our old dispute? Because, if so, I shall wish you had stayed away."

He strode on without waiting for her answer, and entered the house first. As his step sounded in the hall, Lady Dare's voice came to him from an inner room.

"Bruce, are you there? Then, as he stood in the doorway, she came toward him in a flutter of excitement. "Oh, Bruce, I have such news for you: you will never guess it!"

"Probably not, as I know it already," he answered, with disconcerting coolness, and a far from rapturous look. "I met Crystal in the avenue, mother."

"And you were not pleased to see her! You have quarreled again, since you did not come in together." Lady Dare cried, with quick dismay. "Oh, Bruce, how could you?—I thought it so sweet of her to come back for the wedding."

"It would have been 'sweeter' to stay quietly at home," was the grim answer. "But we must take Crystal Joyce as she is, not as we would have her; and, as it pleases you, I am glad that she is back."

He spoke carelessly, with an absolute indifference to the fact that Crystal, at that moment passing through the hall, must hear every word he said.

She did hear, and each word quivered like an arrow in her sore and aching heart; but she hurried past the door, and not till she had reached the safe shelter of her own room did the pent-up misery of her thoughts find relief in speech.

Then she flung her arms above her head, and pacing the room with hurried steps, as her custom was in moments of strong emotion, prayed, if such fierce and violent appeals as hers deserved the name of prayer, that she might be given strength to bear her agony and show no sign.

Presently her passion exhausted itself, and was succeeded by the dull lethargy that was her best shield. She bathed her face, brushed the pale-gold hair back from her lined brow, and went down-stairs looking but little more worn and haggard than usual, so that no one remarked any change.

Even Ronald, the shrewdest, if the least interested observer of the three, only thought, as he touched the hand she held out in listless greeting, that she was overtired by her journey, and perhaps a little shamed and awkward on this the night of her return.

"I wonder what took her away—a mad impulse or a settled plan?" he mused, as he watched the firelight falling upon the fair head and tightly-locked thin hands of Bruce's incomprehensible cousin. "And, having gone, what brought her back? Is she a little crazy, as Bruce says? Perhaps, and yet, with all her eccentricity, I can hardly fancy that. She looks like a person worn out by a terrible secret, a dreadful haunting remorse. She looks as Gustave Ducloux looked yesterday. Yes!"

with a sudden flush, evoked by the remembrance—"unlike as they are, there is the same wild haunted look in both their eyes."

"How was it that you and Bruce did not come back together, Ronald?" Lady Dare asked, dispelling his fancies with the commonplace remark.

"Bruce slipped away, and left me," he answered, with a smile; and Crystal raised her head at the words.

"Left you to bid Miss Ross-Trevor good-bye," she said, with a significance that made Captain Dare uncomfortable.

"Well, yes," he replied coolly, "certainly it was good-bye to Miss Ross-Trevor; since when I see, or rather, speak to her next, she will be Lady Dare."

Crystal said no more, and Lady Dare, after a few moments' silence, began to prattle mildly of the next day's ceremony, of the guests and dresses, the bride-maids, and wedding-gifts—delighted that she had so much to tell, and yet aggrieved that Crystal should not have taken an active part in the preparation for the ceremony.

"It is too absurd that you should not be a bride-maid, Crystal," her ladyship observed almost tearfully, "and so I am sure every one must think."

Crystal answered only by a murmur that might mean anything or nothing; but Captain Dare saw that the book she held shook in her nervous clasp, and that her pale face seemed to take a still grayer tinge. Seeing this, he came gallantly to the rescue, and talked to his aunt until he fairly talked her to sleep.

She had been dozing for perhaps five or ten minutes, and Ronald, who had been listlessly turning over the albums on the table, with thoughts far away from his occupation, was just making up his mind that he had better go in search of Bruce, when Crystal, bending across the table, addressed him by name.

"Do not go just yet, Captain Dare," she said in a low voice, and with evident agitation. "I wish to—I must speak to you to-night."

He looked a little surprised, but answered instantly—

"I am at your service now."

"Yes, now. We need not go away; Lady Dare will not hear. Ronald, you remember what I said to you about this marriage?" He bent his head gravely, but the keen dark eyes never wandered from the pale troubled face. "How hard I tried to prevent it, how I endeavored to enlist your love for Ethel? Oh, forgive me! I did not mean to hurt you; I am so used to pain that I can not always remember to spare others as I might."

"I remember everything," he said, with a little irrepressible sigh; "but from this moment I shall endeavor strenuously to forget—I will forget"—with a flash of the bright brown eyes, a resolute knitting of the brows—"and if you are wise, Crystal, you will do the same."

She looked at him with a glance of passionate envy.

"Oh, if I could!" he heard her cry below her breath; then she added aloud, "You are right, and you are so good and brave and strong, that what you think right you will do, no matter at what cost. I want you to forget."

"And is that all you had to ask me?" he inquired after a pause.

Miss Joyce started nervously at the question, and looked round with frightened eyes, as though she suspected the presence of some lurking listener. Then, as she saw only her aunt slumbering peacefully in her large arm-chair, she came a

little nearer and, with an eager wistfulness that haunted his dreams long after, looked up into his face.

"Yes," she whispered brokenly; "I want you to tell me one thing, Ronald. Do you know anything of madmen and their ways?"

He stared in blank wonder at the startling and irrelevant question.

"Of madmen?" he repeated, in a bewildered tone; and she broke in with savage energy—

"Or madwomen? Suppose that I am—not always, nor even often mad, but that I have a latent, dangerous, homicidal mania lurking within me!"

"Hush," he interrupted, with an irrepressible shudder, for the fierce gleam of the light eyes seemed to make the supposition terribly real—"do not speak of yourself so, Crystal! Suppose a man is liable to go mad at times—what then?"

"What would be likely to bring on the paroxysm?" she asked, with a fierce craving eagerness. "Passion might do it, anger or jealousy, or any startling shock; but, Ronald, think of all you have ever heard or read upon the subject and tell me—that it could not come through joy?"

His face was almost as pale as her own, the desperate eagerness of her agonized appeal sent a curious thrill through him, a hundred vague terrors floated through his mind; by and by they might assume a definite form; but now he shrunk even from examining them.

"Tell me!" the girl urged again; and he answered almost roughly—

"I can tell you nothing, for I do not know; but the brain that could not stand the shock of pain or anger would be, I should think, as likely to turn with a great joy."

## CHAPTER XV.

The gray morning light struggled faintly through the dingy window of Gustave Ducloux's bedroom, dimming the feeble glimmer of the light beside his bed. The woman who had watched him through the long night let the blind fall, and went back to her old place by the hearth.

"What time is it?"

She turned round, a little astonished that her patient was not sleeping, and said in the cheerful tone of a well-trained nurse—

"Just on six—time that you had some nice beef-tea."

The man moved his head impatiently, as though he would have refused the food, then suddenly changed his mind, and took what she offered him greedily, saying feebly, as she shook up his pillow—

"And the doctor—you have sent for him?"

"An hour ago; he should be here by now. Ah, here he is!"—as a loud knock disturbed the stillness of the street.

"Trust Doctor Clayden for promptly obeying a summons."

While she was still speaking, the doctor came in, and walked straight to his patient's side; the dark eyes glittered feverishly with pleasure at his approach, and the man struggled to raise himself in the bed.

"I know—I know," he said, as the other tried to restrain him, and spoke a few hurried words; "I know that I have only a few hours left, but I must spend, not waste them, for there is much to do. Doctor"—nodding at the nurse—"send her away."

Wondering much at the words, which were too calm, for all their eagerness, to be the outcome of delirium, the doctor did as he was told, and when they were alone, the man went on, with desperate, feverish haste—

"Doctor, did I dream it, or did I hear your friend say, that Bruce Dare—was in England—was to be—married?"

"Yes," the doctor answered, with a puzzled and searching look into the anguish-stricken face.

"And—that this was to be his wedding-day?"

"Yes."

A cry, so full of rage and terror and despair that it drove the color from the doctor's face and made his heart throb with unaccustomed quickness, broke from the gray, parted lips, while the dark eyes glittered fiercely.

"Then I must—speak—I will speak, before—before I die," the man said, gasping pitifully after every other word, and only speaking at all by a vehement and agonized effort; "and yet—oh, Heaven, it is hard!"

"Speak—if you have anything to say—more quietly," the doctor urged, in grave reproof, though his pulses tingled with keen curiosity. "This agitation is willful waste of life."

"Let the life go; it is, and has been, worse than death—since Florence Medwin died."

"Florence Medwin!" Clayden echoed blankly. "What do you know of Florence Medwin—or her death?"

The man broke into a hollow laugh—a laugh which would have been horrible anywhere, it was so full of rage and passionate self-scorn, but which was trebly horrible upon a death-bed.

"What do I know of her," he echoed—"the girl I loved—the girl whose death lies at my door? Oh, Heaven, he asks me what I know!"

Doctor Clayden drew back with an irrepressible exclamation of dismay.

"What? Were you her murderer?" he asked, with horror in his eyes and voice; and the man slowly shook his head.

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"I do not know—I would not have harmed a hair of her beautiful head; and yet—you shall judge for yourself—I can not tell the story now; go to that drawer, and bring me what you find there."

Doctor Clayden did as he was told, and brought the sick man a thick envelope, doubly sealed, and bearing the superscription, "To be opened after my death."

"Open it now!" he said hoarsely. "I dare not wait. Open and read it—aloud; and let me see in your face and eyes how the world would have looked upon me had I told my story seven years ago."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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