

# A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

"Oh, ah—for the Darenholme festivities! You assist at the ceremony, do you not? I was glad to hear that poor old Bruce is settling down at last. What of the bride, Dare?"

"Miss Ross-Trevor is a very beautiful girl," Captain Dare answered evasively; "but what of yourself, Clayden; are you settled down, as you call it?"

"I, my dear fellow? I am much too hard-worked to dream dreams at present. Even now, I am on my way—but jump in, and I will tell you all about it."

Ronald accepted the invitation and took his place by Doctor Clayden's side, with a laughing inquiry as to whether he was to accompany his friend on his professional visits.

"Well, yes, on one of them, I think, for I want to interest you in an artist."

"In whom you are interested?" Ronald asked.

"In whom I am strongly interested—the more so, perhaps, because, in spite of much that is winning and attractive in his manner, I do not quite like him."

"Captain Dare looked slightly puzzled, as well he might. It was most unlike John Clayden—whom he had known and admired as a shrewd, practical, hard-headed man before he blossomed into a fashionable physician—to indulge in such curious fancies. Doctor Clayden laughed.

"I am puzzling you, Dare, and that is hardly curious when I puzzle myself at times. But wait till you see my patient, and then you will understand. However, I am calling rather as an art-critic than a doctor to-day, and in that character I am privileged to introduce a friend. I think you will be struck by Gustave Ducloz's extraordinary talent, and by something else."

Ronald nodded, and thought little more of the subject. A studio-visit would be rather an agreeable diversion than otherwise, for his love of art was a strong and genuine feeling, though, as he himself was the first to admit, he was but a tyro in its practice.

The two old friends had many acquaintances in common and many subjects to discuss, and the time passed quickly away—so quickly that Captain Dare was a little startled when the carriage stopped at a house in one of the small and dingy streets running from Oxford Street to Soho.

"Your genius is not rich, I am afraid," he remarked, with a swift glance at the grimy dwelling. Doctor Clayden shook his head.

"About as poor as a man can be; and, I greatly fear, dying of consumption. And yet—"

The sentence remained incomplete, for the slipshod servant who opened the door informed them at that moment that Monsieur Ducloz was in and would be happy to see them.

The studio—a small, light, poorly furnished room at the very top of the house—was empty when they entered, and Ronald Dare's bright eyes wandered curiously round. The young man had many artist friends, and loved nothing better than a ramble among sketches, and "curios," and pictures in the rough. But he had not hitherto visited a room like this, in which there was absolutely nothing but a rough easel and a few unframed canvases turned to the wall.

The bareness and suggestive poverty of the place touched his sympathetic heart. He began to feel glad that John Clayden had brought him to this abode of genius in distress. He was not a rich man, but neither was he so poor that he could not afford to possess himself of a picture or two if Monsieur Ducloz had any for sale.

The door opened while he was comforting himself with this idea, and Monsieur Ducloz himself appeared, standing hesitating in the doorway like a frightened girl.

The comparison flashed into Ronald Dare's mind as he noted the new-comer's appearance, and the feeling grew almost painfully strong when he spoke, for the voice, low, liquid, and musical, had a strange broken tremor that seemed to tell of most unmanly fear.

"And fear of what," Ronald wondered blankly—"surely not of Clayden, who is so anxious to befriend him, and most surely not of me yet? He grows red and white, and rolls those big eyes of his as though we were a couple of policemen sent to arrest him."

"Well, Monsieur Ducloz, I have availed myself of your permission, and brought a friend to see your pictures," the doctor said, with a genial heartiness that might well have tranquilized the most irritable nerves, and set the shyest of men at ease; but, though he bowed with foreign grace to Captain Dare, the color only flamed more hotly in M. Ducloz's hollow cheeks, and the dark eyes shone with a curiously troubled look.

As he came a little nearer, and as the bright light fell upon the picturesque head and face, Ronald saw that he was much older than he had at first imagined, and, although somewhat effeminate-looking, a strikingly handsome man.

He hardly seemed to hear or heed the

introduction, but talked at once of art and pictures, and English galleries, speaking fluently, though with an accent decidedly French.

"You have been some time in England, I suppose," Ronald began, by way of saying something, as the artist bent over the canvases that Dr. Clayden had asked him to produce.

"Yes—no—that is—I know it very well; but I do not always live here," he answered confusedly, turning his head so quickly aside that he knocked a portfolio full of sketches from the table, and the contents were scattered over the floor.

Dr. Clayden and Ronald stooped simultaneously to repair the damage; and the former caught up a little water-color sketch, which, instead of replacing in the portfolio, he regarded with admiring surprise.

"The same model, but a happier effort even than usual," he observed delightedly. "There is life in every feature of the beautiful face; look, Dare!"

And, before M. Ducloz could stretch out his hand, as he seemed half inclined to do, and snatch the paper from him, the doctor had placed it in Captain Dare's extended hand.

"There," he cried, half laughing, "do you think it reasonable that a man who can paint like that should refuse to sell his pictures, and make no attempt to exhibit? Why, Dare, what ails you now?"

He might well ask the question; for Ronald Dare had evidently paid no heed to what he said, but was staring from the picture to the artist, and from the artist back to the picture, with terror in his face.

"Don't you like the face—but that is impossible—or do you know the lady?"

"That too is impossible," M. Ducloz broke in, with arrogant impatience, and held out his hand for the picture; but Captain Dare held it fast. His face was pale; but he had regained his self-control. "It is not impossible. I know the lady," he answered quietly; "and I should be glad to become the possessor of this picture at any price that M. Ducloz might name."

M. Ducloz looked as savage as though he had received an insult rather than a handsome offer, and said as rudely as the tremulous weakness of his tones would permit—

"The picture is not for sale, and the original is dead."

The sketch fell from Ronald's hand, and fluttered idly to the ground. A sudden dazed sense of bewilderment came over the young man. Either this stranger was deceiving him with a senseless, purposeless falsehood, or he had looked on what, line for line and tint for tint, was Ethel Ross-Trevor's face.

He roused himself with the remembrance that he owed the artist some reparation and stammered lamely and confusedly—

"I beg your pardon, but there is an extraordinary resemblance—"

"Come, what comedy of errors are you two playing?" the doctor interposed briskly. "Because, unless you understand each other pretty quickly, I shall not be able to see the play out. Whom did you take the picture for, Dare?"

"Dare!" the artist broke in quickly. "Is your name Dare?"

"Yes," Ronald answered, puzzled by the fierce eagerness with which the question was put; then, as the other only turned his head aside, he added, "Do you know the name?"

Gustave Ducloz did not answer; but the frail figure was shaken as though by a convulsive sob.

Captain Dare looked appealingly at the doctor, whose face was as puzzled as his own, and very grave.

Presently the artist spoke in a choking voice.

"Tell me of your goodness," he said humbly, "the name of—that girl."

Captain Dare hesitated a second, then answered frankly—

"I might give you two names, for the picture might stand for that of two girls—cousins—who bear the most marvelous resemblance to each other. The one is Miss Ross-Trevor, who is to marry my cousin the day after to-morrow—the other—"

"What of the other? I have never heard Miss Ross-Trevor's name."

"The other has been dead seven years."

"And her name?" the man asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Her name was Florence Medwin. Good heavens, Clayden!"

But Doctor Clayden, quicker than the young soldier to see how the frantic struggle for breath and speech must needs end, had already caught the light swaying figure just in time to save it from a fall. As he raised the heavy head, both saw that the pale lips were stained with blood.

"What does it mean?" Captain Dare asked vaguely, and the doctor answered in his practical fashion—

"It means just at present that he has broken a blood-vessel, and that we must do what we can to save his life."

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"Well, that was a curious visit!" the doctor cried, with a searching look into his companion's face as the carriage rolled rapidly away from the dingy neighborhood. "Is there such a thing as a chapter of accidents, Dare? If there is, I am sure our adventures deserve a place in it to-day. Nothing could be more wildly im-

probable than my capturing you on your way through from Dublin to Scantibury, and taking you to inspect the pictures of that perfectly unknown young man, and yet—"

"And yet it all came to pass," Ronald Dare said gravely. "Clayden, I am not a superstitious man; but I cannot help thinking there is more than accident in this. I think we have unraveled the first thread of a tragic mystery to-day!"

"A tragic mystery? Come down from the clouds, man, and tell me in plain English what you mean. There may be something mysterious in the fact that Ducloz possesses Miss Ross-Trevor's picture; but, unless you mean to make her bridegroom jealous, I fail to see where the tragedy comes in."

"Wait!" Ronald Dare responded, with the same stern gravity. "The picture was not Miss Ross-Trevor's, though at first sight the likeness was startling; the arrangement of the hair and the dress were of the fashion of seven or eight years ago, when Ethel Ross-Trevor must have been a little girl at the time."

"Then the resemblance was merely accidental," broke in the impatient doctor. "And it is a case of much ado about nothing, after all."

"Far from it, Clayden. Do you remember Florence Medwin, who was engaged to my cousin Bruce and murdered on the eve of her wedding-day?"

"Every one remembers the terrible story, but I never saw the poor girl. Well!"

"The picture is hers; and, not only that—her head appears on every canvas in the room. Evidently it was the one face the painter could, or did portray."

Doctor Clayden had grown almost as pale as his friend, and something of the same suppressed excitement shone in his eyes.

"Gently, gently. Do not run away with theories that may be cruelly unjust," he said, plainly showing by his caution that his thoughts were traveling the same road as Ronald Dare's. "The fact is strange, no doubt, and still stranger is that which first excited my curiosity with regard to Gustave Ducloz—the fact that though he is almost starving, nothing will induce him to part with a picture. But it would be hardly fair to infer from that—"

"That he at least knows something of Miss Medwin's death? Yet I do infer it, Clayden!"

"In fact that he is the murderer?" Dr. Clayden queried, with horror; and Ronald shook his head.

"I do not know. I only feel sure—certain as that I live and breathe, and still have that dreadful tortured face before my eyes—that he has some, if not a guilty knowledge of her death."

"Every effort was made to trace the murderer at the time?" the doctor put in argumentatively, though he was more impressed than he chose to admit by the sorrowful conviction of the other's tone.

"And every effort failed, as such efforts do fail every day. And now, after all these years, on the very eve of Bruce Dare's wedding once again, I believe that vengeance is on the murderer's track."

"It must be another vengeance than ours, Dare, if Gustave Ducloz be the murderer," said the doctor gravely, "for his days are surely numbered here—indeed I hardly think he will live through the night!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

"Walk with me to the gate, Ethel."

Bruce spoke with even more than his usual passionate tenderness; and Ethel, growing a little paler, rose promptly to obey him, though she glanced shyly back at Captain Dare, at that moment talking to her aunt. Bruce saw the look and fired up at once.

"Oh, you need not mind Ronald!" he said, so jealously that the girl was inwardly thankful that he spoke in a lowered tone. "He has the sense to see he is not wanted—at least by me; and if I thought that you preferred his society—"

"Well, what then?" Ethel asked, as he paused, with a long-drawn breath.

"I could kill you or him," was the whispered answer; and, brave as she was, the girl quailed for a second beneath the fury of his glance. The next minute it was quenched in a sudden mist, and he was humbly imploring pardon and finding no words strong enough to condemn his savage jealousy. "I have frightened you, my darling," he said, with deepest contrition; "but you must forgive me, Ethel. Jealousy is the curse of my mad love."

She raised the sweet earnest eyes, whose clear straightforward glance should have killed all doubt, and answered a little sadly—

"Why should your love be mad, Bruce? I am very proud of, very grateful for, your affection, dear; but sometimes I think I should like a little less passion, a little more faith and trust. I try to be worthy of both."

The young man drew her to him with a quick movement she was powerless to resist, and kissed the pale fair face again and again.

"You are an angel!" he exclaimed brokenly. "And I— But I must not think of that. Ethel, you do not love me as I love you; sometimes I think that you do not love me at all; but I put that thought from me; it would drive me

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mad. However, loving or not, you mean to marry me to-morrow!"

"Yes," she answered, and looked up into his face with a frank sweet smile.

"I was a little startling in my vehemence," he went on in his old gentle tone, "but something ran away with my tongue. I must not make the old excuse that offends you, so I will make none. Good-night, my darling; for the last time good-bye."

"Good-bye," she repeated, dreamily wondering why the words rang so sorrowfully in her ears that they brought the tears to her eyes and sent a nervous thrill through all her frame.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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