

A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

"I felt indignant with the girl—I never did and never shall like Crystal Joyce, Ethel—I hope there will be no friendship between you two—and I tried to take the sting from her wanton malice, and cover poor Lady Dare's confusion with a flood of small talk and an inquiry after her nerves. You will have enough of Lady Dare's nerves in the days to come, Ethel!"

"Well—" Mrs. Medwin paused, and Ethel instinctively clasped the hand she held in silent assurance of her interest and sympathy. "Mine is a long story, after all, my dear. I have fallen into the common fault of those who have a painful tale to tell, lingering on the brighter part, shrinking with cowardly delay, which is as vain as cowardly, because it does not spare us a single pang, from that of which it is inexplicable agony to think or speak; but there is little more to tell now, and that little may be briefly told."

"The engagement was not to be a long one; the preparations for the wedding went rapidly on. Dareholme was put in order for the reception of a new mistress, though Lady Dare and Crystal Joyce were not to retire to the Dower House until the young pair returned from their honeymoon trip."

"Bruce was the most ardent and devoted of lovers; but I thought that Florrie grew strangely nervous and restless as the wedding-day drew near. Once or twice, as I noticed the bright flush on her soft cheek, the feverish brightness of her lovely eyes, and saw how completely the old tranquil grace that seemed a part of her had become a thing of the past, I began to ask myself whether she really cared for Bruce Dare, or whether in her silent fashion she was sacrificing herself to gratify her parents' whim."

"At last I could bear the doubt no longer, and questioned her—with an absolutely satisfactory result."

"Yes, I love him, mother," she said quietly, but the rose flush changed to vivid scarlet, and the violet eyes glowed with deep emotion. "I love him as I did not think I could love. It is so strange to find that one's heart is warm and living when one thought it dead."

"I laughed as I kissed the beautiful earnest face. Ah, me, how little I have laughed since then!"

"Dead! Foolish child! You mean it has never lived until now," I returned gayly; and Florrie answered with a hurried "Perhaps so," and let the subject drop. "All went well until the day before the wedding, and then—Oh, child, how shall I tell you the rest?"

Mrs. Medwin paused, the tears rolling unheeded down her pale cheeks, her hands tightly locked. Ethel, herself weeping softly for sympathy, broke in eagerly—

"Do not tell me; it hurts you too much. Let me say it, dear Aunt Annie! On the very eve of what should have been her wedding day, poor pretty Florrie, in some strange and dreadful fashion, died."

"Worse—far worse than that!" the mother answered, with a wild wailing cry. "She was murdered, Ethel!"

Ethel sprang to her feet, with a little scream of terror, forgetting all things, even the mother's grief, in that overwhelming shock.

"Murdered," she repeated blankly, her lips white and stiff, her violet eyes gleaming blankly from the deathly pallor of her face—"murdered! Your only child! Oh, poor Aunt Annie, it is too horrible!"

"And yet it is true," Mrs. Medwin answered, with a composure that made the girl blush for her impetuous outbreak—the idea that had frozen the blood in Ethel's veins was a familiar, if it could never cease to be an agonizing memory to her. "Florrie went out to meet her lover at about five o'clock on the afternoon of the last day of September—it is only about a mile to the station—and he was to arrive by the quarter-to-six train. Never had she looked lovelier, brighter, or happier than when she turned back at the gate to nod her laughing good-bye. I wish I could see her dear face always as I saw it then; for, when I saw it next—She never met her lover, Ethel; she never came back to us alive. That night they brought home her dead body, with a gaping wound on the white temple, and the cruel mark of strangling fingers about the pretty white throat."

CHAPTER VI.

Ethel Ross-Trevor did not hear the end of the story that had so thrilled and horrified her that day, for Mr. Medwin came in soon after the telling of the main catastrophe, and on his entrance the subject of discourse necessarily changed. Nor in deed did she hear it for many days to come.

"Did you get wet, James? The storm came on so soon and so heavily after you left," Mrs. Medwin asked, raising her mild eyes to her husband's face as he stood comfortably warming himself on the rug, and surveying with evident

"Oh, nothing to speak of!" he answered lightly. "And how have you and Miss Ethel there amused yourselves without me all the afternoon?"

His wife answered only by a little patient sigh, which he apparently understood, for his cheery weather-beaten face grew suddenly grave, and he tugged at his gray mustache in thoughtful silence for a few minutes; but the silence was not unbroken, for Mrs. Medwin turned to the bewildered girl, who was watching them with the same vague haunting sense of unreality that had come to her a few minutes back and was a new experience in her straightforward life, and said, with a little smile—

"You shall give your uncle a cup of tea, Ethel. I delegate my duties to you. You will have to pay particular attention to the proportions of cream and sugar, for I warn you that he is a tyrant in the matter."

Mr. Medwin's face brightened, as she meant it to do, with his wife's more cheerful tone.

"Yes, you are only taken on trial," he put in gayly, coming over to the small table on which stood the quaint boat-shaped Queen Anne service and the big silver tray; "so now take my instructions once for all—one lump neither too large nor too small of sugar, and of cream, just so much and no more."

Ethel followed the instructions, given with such mock solemnity, literally enough; but all the time one thought filled her mind, and seemed to echo with passionate persistency in her ears.

"I must be dreaming—it can not be true," she thought, as her bright eyes wandered round the pretty cozy room, to all appearance a scene of domestic happiness and calm content, and then rested, with almost indignant wonder, upon her uncle's cheerful countenance and her aunt's gentle placid face. "If it had been true, if their only child had been murdered—taken from them in such a strange and horrible fashion, they could never have raised their heads again—they must have died of the shock! How could they care for anything in the world after that? But they do! Aunt Annie cares for her flowers, and her birds, and Flossy, she is even proud of her pretty things, and interested in her neighbors' affairs; while Uncle James does nothing but laugh and joke! Oh, it is not true, or—they do not care!"

Ethel learned before long to blush for the hardness and injustice of her youthful judgment, to understand that a sorrow is none the less a sorrow for being bravely and cheerfully borne, to love and reverence her Aunt Annie as she had never loved or revered man or woman yet; but she never ventured to recall to the subject of that unfinished conversation, and her ungratified curiosity became a keen pain at last.

In the meantime she had plenty to occupy her. All Scantlebury flocked in to make the acquaintance of Mr. Medwin's niece, the fame of whose remarkable beauty, and still more remarkable resemblance to the poor young bride, whose tragic ending was still fresh in all men's memory, soon spread abroad and made quite a sensation in the quiet place.

Among the first to call were Lady Dare and Crystal Joyce, the former warmly effusive, the latter more repellantly stiff and unpleasant than ever. But that other subjects occupied her thoughts, and that the girl looked ill and haggard enough to account for any amount of irritability and evil temper, Mr. Medwin must have administered a rebuke to her uncomfortable guest.

As it was, however, she was only anxious to prepare both women for the shock that Ethel's first appearance must give. She essayed to do this in a few hurried words that only made Lady Dare, who never understood anything just at once, hot, flurried, and uncomfortable, and brought a quick and curiously defiant gleam to Miss Joyce's dull heavy-lidded eyes.

And, after all, the warning might just as well have been left unspoken, for, when Ethel came forward, with the sunshine playing in her ruffled dusky locks and bringing new warmth into her smooth soft cheeks, Lady Dare first stared at her in a dazed bewildered fashion, then burst into a flood of weak and ready tears.

"Oh, Annie, how can you bear that child here?" she sobbed, almost reproachfully. "She must be an ever present reminder, a perpetual grief; I could not bear to see another girl with poor dear Florrie's face."

"A perpetual comfort, you mean," Mrs. Medwin said, answering Ethel's troubled look rather than the other's rambling speech.

And then Crystal Joyce put out a long thin hand that felt chilly through its covering of kid, and murmured some words that Ethel could not catch.

But, her first emotional outburst past, Lady Dare was not to be put off with so cold a greeting. She felt that her words had given pain, and, in her eager impulsive way, was anxious to efface the impression. Besides, she had really been fond of Florence Medwin in her wild barum-scarum fashion, and her heart warmed to this new-comer with the dead girl's face.

"Come here, my dear," she said kindly; and, when Ethel obediently came, she folded the slim young figure in her embrace, and kissed the pretty face affectionately, saying in her rough hearty

voice, "You must forgive me if I hurt you, little girl. You can not understand what it is to us who loved her to see poor Florrie's living image walking about the place; but by and by I shall grow reconciled to it as your aunt has done, and then I hope that you and I shall be great friends."

Crystal Joyce's thin lip curled with passionate scorn, her dull eyes blazed with a sullen fire as she listened and looked.

"Is she mad?" she thought, keeping back with a strong effort the wild words that rose to her lips—words that would have bidden Ethel Ross-Trevor to put the width of the wide world between herself and any of the Dares. "Is she mad—or in her blind besotted folly—in her childish yielding to the impulse of the moment—has she forgotten—Bruce!"

Ethel glanced to look at her just then, and the chance grew into a fascinated stare. Never, the girl thought, had she seen so strangely horrible a face—a face that, seen in the clear sunlight in circumstances no more romantic or suggestive than those of a morning-call, brought such incongruous images as death and madness to the young stranger's mind. Always pale, Miss Joyce's face was livid this morning, and its startling pallor was enhanced by her dress and bonnet, both of unrelieved steel-gray; but more striking even than her ghastly tint were the fierce line of the delicate brows—which were drawn together till they almost met—the sullen fire of the half veiled eyes, the incessant twitching of the pale thin lips.

"She looks as though she were in fierce pain and would not utter a cry," the girl decided; and the impression that Miss Joyce was suffering some actual physical agony grew so strong that she came a little nearer, and asked, in a low tone, if she were not ill.

Crystal stared for a second, then answered with a negative so uncivilly curt that Miss Ross-Trevor, among whose many virtues meekness found no place, regretted her kindly impulse and drew back with an offended frown.

Soon after that the visitors left, and Mrs. Medwin reflected, with a little sigh of relief, that one of her dreadful interventions was over, and that she really only greatly cared now for the effect that Ethel's appearance might have on Bruce Dare.

"Well," said Lady Dare, as soon as she and her companion were safely out of hearing, "of all the remarkable, astounding likenesses I ever saw, that is the strangest and strongest; that my nerves should give way under the shock was to be expected; but I looked at you, Crystal, when Ethel Ross-Trevor came into the room, and your face was quite awful; you seemed as though you were suddenly struck blind and dumb."

She paused with an inquiring look; but Crystal might have been blind and dumb and deaf into the bargain for all the notice she took; her face was set in a hard look of half-frightened pain.

"Really, Crystal, you might be a little more sympathetic," the other went on dejectedly. "You see me thoroughly upset, my nerves all jarred and unstrung, and you will not even speak, or make the most trifling comment on this—this most extraordinary fact."

Miss Joyce turned with a fierce impatient movement that frightened Lady Dare, and made her wish that she had suffered her uncomfortable companion to dream on undisturbed.

"Why should I speak? What I say will not please you," she returned, her dull rough tones thrilling with passion.

Lady Dare's large eyes dilated.

"You do not try to please me," she said, with a touch of dignity; "but what fault you can find with me or Mrs. Medwin, or with that poor pretty child, I think it would puzzle you to say."

"Would it?" Miss Joyce echoed, with a drearily mocking laugh. "With or without reason, I find fault with you all—most fault of all with myself and Fate. Oh, is it not cruel to think that Bruce will come back after all these dreary years hoping to gain peace and forgetfulness, only to find her here!"

The tears rose in Lady Dare's eyes; the mother's heart was touched by what seemed almost an overstrained unreasonable pity, and a moment back she had been thinking the girl hard. She took the long thin hand lying idly on Crystal's lap, and squeezed it affectionately in her own warm clasp.

"My dear Crystal," she said gratefully, "I did not think you cared so much; but one never knows the feeling of one's closest friends. We must not look altogether on the gloomy side, you know. When things are darkest they begin to mend; and, though the outlook is certainly gloomy enough, I think—I hope that there is in it a ray of light for my dear Bruce."

"I do not understand," the other put in, with a doubting half-sullen look.

"Do you not? Then I will tell you. I think it is not for nothing that Ethel Ross-Trevor has her cousin's very face—her every trick of speech and gesture. When Bruce sees her he will think that his dead love has come back to him, and who knows—"

"Do not say it," Crystal panted, her hand closing in a vise-like pressure on the other's wrist, her eyes fixed on the paling face; "do not say anything so strange and horrible, unless you wish to drive me mad!"

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"Drive you mad!" Lady Dare echoed a little indignantly. "I think you are mad already, Crystal. Your temper is really outrageous to-day. What is there strange or horrible in the idea that my boy should be made happy after his long pain? I do not know how the Medwins might feel about the matter; but for my part, nothing would give me greater satisfaction than to see Bruce and Ethel Ross-Trevor man and wife!"

A few minutes' silence followed the petulant declaration; then Crystal spoke in a low clear voice that echoed unpleasantly in Lady Dare's ears for many days to come.

"And rather than see them even caring for each other, I could pray that I might see them dead; and, if Heaven failed me, I think I could kill them both myself!"

The quiet manner was in ghastly contrast to the savage words. Lucilla Dare felt her blood run cold.

"She is mad! I will speak to Bruce about her," she decided in quick terror, and, so deciding, thought it well to let the exciting subject drop.

CHAPTER VII.

"My dear, dear Bruce, how good of you to come! How good it is to see you home again!"

And, growing a little hysterical in her excited joy, Lady Dare rested her handsome head on her son's shoulder, and wept and laughed over the closing words.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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ESTABLISHED 1889.

The Review,

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