

# A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."  
CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"I rang and ordered tea, as I spoke, and never ceased talking while the servant was in the room, telling him a thousand frivolous items of village gossip that I did not know my memory held, and bantering him about the headache that would make him a dismal bridegroom on the morrow; and all the time my heart held such an anguish of dread and horror unutterable as must needs have broken it, if hearts could break.

"At last the servant went, thinking no doubt that he had left a merry couple; I am sure the echo of my laughter followed him across the hall: and then—then I ran into the dining-room, and, taking a bottle of brandy from the cellaret, poured some of its contents into Bruce's cup.

"Drink that," I said. "It will rouse you"—for he seemed drowsy. "You would not doze in Florence's company; and as you will pay your last visit to the White House after dinner, I think you had better have a refreshing nap now; at any rate, I can spare you no more time, as I must try on my dress."

"I left him then, well aware that no one would venture to disturb him, and kept my maid with me for an hour or more, trying her patience with a hundred fanciful complaints and rewarding it with a little gracious gossip—all, as I assured her, gathered from Sir Bruce. Both proceedings were out of all keeping with my character; but the girl was not a keen critic, and they served to convince her what a pleasant chatty hour Sir Bruce and I had had.

"We never heard him come in," she remarked once; and I answered carelessly—  
"No; he came through the veranda, seeing me there. By the bye"—with a little start as the clock chimed out seven—"what can make my aunt so late?"

"I was just wondering. It is quite dark now," the girl replied, drawing down the blind; and my lady so dislikes a dark drive. Ah, what is that?  
"It was a groom riding post-haste up the avenue—a groom in the Medwin livery; and I knew that the moment I so dreaded, yet so longed for, had come.

"Acting on the impulse of the moment, I ran down the stairs, followed closely by the pale and frightened Emma.  
"My aunt!" I cried, meeting the man at the door. "Lady Dare—there has been an accident! Something is wrong!"  
"Not with her, miss," the groom answered, with impatient civility; and his eyes traveled past me and eagerly round the hall; but there is terrible news for Sir Bruce. Is Sir Bruce here?  
"Yes, yes; fetch him, some one! And your news?" I cried, letting my terror show itself plainly now.  
"As bad as can be, miss. My young lady went to meet Sir Bruce at the station."  
"To meet Sir Bruce! Why, Sir Bruce has been here more than two hours," I gasped desperately; and the man shook his head.  
"She never reached the station, miss; she was met and robbed and murdered on her way; they have just found her body in the wood."  
"My scream of terror was followed by a dull smothered groan. The man and I looked quickly round just in time to see Bruce fall heavily to the ground.  
"The servants broke into a shrill chorus of dismayed sympathy; but in my heart I thanked Heaven as I had never thanked it before; for I knew that while that insensibility lasted he was safe."  
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"I can not dwell on what followed, Ronald," Crystal said, a few minutes later, when she had regained something like strength and calm; "it is and always has been a dream of nightmare horror to me. Besides, you know the rest—the inquest, the verdict, Bruce's long illness, and the delirium from which he awoke, with his mind a perfect blank."  
"Yes," the man replied in a low tone; "but, Crystal, do you mean that after that, through all these years, he never remembered?"  
Crystal did not answer instantly; but he saw the thin fingers tighten upon each other in a convulsive clasp, and the brows contract in a spasm of fierce pain.  
"I do not know—never shall know now," she almost whispered; "and sometimes, Ronald, I am glad he told the whole story often in his ravings, but never once when he was sane. But I have seen him watch me with a curious terror in his eyes; and once—"  
"And once," Ronald Dare repeated, as she paused, trembling violently.  
"Once, in a last desperate effort to save Ethel Ross-Trevor from what seemed her inevitable fate, I asked him if he knew of no insuperable obstacle between them—of nothing that made it sin for him to marry any girl. He turned upon me with ungovernable fury, and threatened to have me locked up as a madwoman—me! Oh, my poor, poor Bruce!"  
"And then?"  
"Then I felt that things must take their course—that fate was strong for me. I had felt, from the moment Ethel ap-

peared, it could be as a minister of vengeance that the dead girl came amongst us in living flesh and blood after seven long years, and in the moment of Bruce's return. I could not tell whether the sight of her would be horrible to him as it was to me. I half hoped he would shrink from and avoid her; but from the first he loved her with a mad love, and was her abject slave. You know the rest; is there any more to tell?"  
"Yes; just one thing. Why did you leave Dareholme, Crystal; and, having gone, why did you return?"  
"Why?" she echoed, with a bitter laugh. "I can not tell you. I think I went because I could not look on Ethel's innocent face and remember the probable fate before her. I came back because something drew me—something told me that the end was at hand."

Ronald stood watching her in pitiful silence, thinking of the long, wrong-headed, unselfish martyrdom, in which her youth and womanhood had worn away—the martyrdom that had won for her only suspicion and dislike. There was hardly a woman in the county who could speak without a civil sneer of Crystal Joyce; and yet, which among them would have borne what she had borne? Unconsciously the thought translated itself into words; he said aloud—  
"And there are martyrs who have won The cross, without the crown of glory."  
"Oh, hush!" she cried imploringly. "I have been wicked—cruel; but I loved him so dearly! How could I betray Bruce?"

"You could not—I am not blaming you, Crystal," he answered, with a heavy sigh. "And now can we not spare him still? Think, for we must decide once for all! Gustave Ducloz's confession is the only evidence against him, for his own wild words count for nothing with those who think him mad. Gustave Ducloz is dead; shall not the story that will only revive old torturing memories die with him, Crystal? Speak!"

But for the moment Crystal could not; she had fallen upon her knees at Ronald Dare's feet, and was clinging to the hand with which he tried to raise her.  
"Oh, if it could!" she cried passionately. "For her sake, his mother's, yours, and his own! If only the cruel story need never come to light I would live my seven years' agony again!"  
"Then it shall not—trust all to me," the young man assured her, with grave firmness. "But your agony is past, Crystal; and, for Bruce—oh, should we not be glad 'life's brief madness' is over" for him!"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

Two years later, on a fine August afternoon, when the harvest was golden over all the land, and Dareholme was looking its brightest and best, a party of three women assembled in the wide pleasant window that looked down the carriage drive.  
Lady Dare, who was apparently the most pleasantly excited of the three, was a little wiser and older and more worn-looking than on the day she won the admiration of the crowd as she passed into Scantlebury church; but she bore her sorrow almost as lightly as her years, and was a superb specimen of matronly beauty still, bright of skin, dark of hair, keen and swift of vision as of yore. Crystal Joyce beside her, with her colorless skin and hair already thickly streaked with gray, looked a worn faded old woman.

But the premature age that had fallen upon Miss Joyce was not the only nor even the most noticeable change that had befallen her. The old look of restless pain and discontent had passed away, and in its place there was a serene and patient expression that made the pale face wonderfully sweet. Mrs. Medwin often thought that the possessed creatures of old must have looked curiously like Crystal Joyce when by some miracle of mercy the demons of unrest that tortured them had been exorcised and cast out.

As for Mrs. Medwin herself, she was just the same gentle bright-faced woman she had ever been. No one could look into her face and doubt that she had known sorrow; but it was the sorrow that refines and ennobles—sorrow bravely and patiently borne.  
"Well," Lady Dare said, looking for the twentieth time in ten minutes at her watch, and then at Mrs. Medwin's face. "The train must be late, Annie; they are at least three minutes over time."  
"And here they are," Crystal put in quietly, as the carriage entered the avenue.

She glanced a little anxiously at Lady Dare, as though aware that she must pass through some painful ordeal; but the anxiety faded in a little wistful smile of wonder at her own mistake, for the fine face was radiant with delight, as the handsome old lady moved toward the door intent only on welcoming Sir Ronald Dare and his bride.  
"She has forgotten Bruce," Crystal thought, with a dull patient pain. "She does not think of what might have been two years ago."

She felt a light touch on her shoulder, and, looking up, saw that Mrs. Medwin had lingered in the room, and was watching her a little anxiously.  
"Crystal!" she said, almost affectionately—her old dislike of Crystal Joyce was a

far-away and forgotten thing now. "This is a trying day for you—for all of us; but—"

"Oh, it is not that!" Crystal answered hurriedly—"I was afraid for—for her. And she does not even remember Bruce."  
"And is it not best that she should forget?"

Before Crystal could answer the carriage had stopped, and husband and wife were in the hall, Ethel in Lady Dare's outstretched arms.

"My dear child!" her ladyship said effusively; then she drew back a little, and regarded the blushing lovely face with critical attention. "What do you say, Annie? Ronald does not seem to have ill-used her; I never saw her looking better in my life."  
Ethel blushed and laughed, and passed on to her aunt, and then to Crystal Joyce, lingering longer with the girl she had formerly disliked and distrusted than with either of the others.

Crystal looked long and earnestly at the radiant face, the shining eyes, and sweet red lips. There was no envy in that glance, though she knew full well the cruel contrast the two presented as they stood together.  
"You have not welcomed us home yet, Crystal," Ethel said, with a tremor in her tone; and Crystal bent suddenly forward and kissed her.

"I need not ask if you are happy," she responded, with a faint smile. "Ronald's wife must be that; but, if you are always as happy as I wish you, you will have no cause to complain."  
"Thank you, Crystal." It was Ronald who answered; he had come over to his wife's side, and Crystal saw the look of full and glad content that passed between them, saw it without one resentful pang. "Ethel will treasure that wish, I assure you, for she is a superstitious little soul, and I think she half believes in your power to bless or ban!"

"What nonsense, Ronald! As though poor Crystal were a witch!" Lady Dare put in gayly; but Crystal knew that a deeper meaning lay beneath the light-sounding words, and it was she that answered, looking straight into the kind, frank eyes before which her tortured heart had once been laid bare, which had read its tragic story like a printed book.  
"If it is in my power to bless, your lives will be rich in blessing," she returned, in so low a tone that only Ronald and Ethel heard her; and then, as though afraid of betraying further emotion, she moved away, and left the new-comers to those who had a greater claim upon them in the hour of their return.

It was a quiet home-coming for a bride and bridegroom, and it followed an unostentatious wedding, which, much to Scantlebury's disgust, had been performed at a London church, and proclaimed only when it was over; but all those most concerned in the matter felt that a wedding at Scantlebury was altogether out of the question.  
The grass was green on Bruce Dare's grave, and the story of his tragic end was, if not forgotten, long since dismissed to the limbo of things worn threadbare, before Ethel Ross-Trevor and Ronald Dare met again; and when they met it was long before they spoke of love.

Of Bruce's crime nothing was known. His mad words were accepted only as evidence of his madness, even by those who heard distinctly what he said. Mr. and Mrs. Medwin thought, with a shuddering thankfulness, of the peril their niece had escaped; but in common with all the rest of the world, they believed that, until the terrible death of his betrothed, Bruce had been perfectly sane, that the shock then received had turned his brain, and so, most mercifully, their reawakened grief was not imbibed, as it must have been, by the discovery that they had lived on friendly and affectionate terms with the man whose hand was red with their daughter's blood.  
And Ethel! Ethel was long in recovering from the shock. She felt oppressed by the sympathy so freely lavished on the widowed bride. It was a relief to her when Ronald rejoined his regiment in Dublin, when Mr. and Mrs. Medwin, whom her pale face and listless weariness of life began to alarm, carried her off to spend the winter among the palms and olive-groves of the Riviera, hoping that health and peace and forgetfulness would come under the blue skies beside the "tideless inland sea." And by and by health at last came; the girl was too young and vigorous to sink under such a blow. Little by little the hollow cheeks filled out and brightened with their old carnation tints, the violet eyes regained their liquid luster, the slender figure its elastic grace; but the girl told herself day and night, with vehement passionate protest, that happiness was a thing of the past for her, and that she never could forget.

Mrs. Medwin smiled gently when these protests reached her, but, being a wise woman, she was content only to smile, knowing full well what time could do. The future had mapped itself out pretty clearly in her mind, and to her at least it was no surprise when, nearly a year after her return to Scantlebury, Ronald Dare told his love.  
"My darling, I am very, very glad," she said, when, pale and red by turns, wide-eyed and frightened at her own joy, Ethel told the wonderful news that seemed to be no news at all—"but not surprised, you little goose. I told your

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uncle how it would be—six months ago."

"And he?" the girl asked shyly.  
"He was as pleased as I. Every one will be pleased that at last there should be some happiness at Dareholme. And let me tell you a secret, Ethel! The dearest wish of Lady Dare's heart is to see Ronald settle down at Dareholme with you as his wife."  
"Oh, Aunt Annie, are you sure?" the girl cried, with an eagerness that showed how much the assurance meant to her. "To Bruce's mother it must seem so strange."  
"Bruce's mother does not think so—of that I am as sure as her own words can make me. So be happy, and make Ronald happy, with a light heart, my dear."

After that all went smoothly with the young couple, until this the hour of their return to Dareholme. Crystal and Lady Dare, "the dowager," as she called herself, with hearty enjoyment of the joke, were established at the Dower House, and had only come over to be the first to welcome them to their new home.  
The Medwins went back to the White House soon after dinner; and, the evening being radiantly bright, Ethel proposed that they should all walk together, a proposal that was accepted with acclamation. Lady Dare and Crystal were dropped at the pretty red brick ivy-grown house, just within the park gates, and then the four others strolled on through the summer moonlight, Ethel chatting brightly and gayly to her uncle, Mrs. Medwin following in a more sedate, but not less contented fashion with Ronald Dare.

They parted at the gate of the White House, and, as he paused to look back from the rising ground, Mr. Medwin saw with some surprise that the young pair were crossing the meadow, instead of taking the road back to Dareholme.  
"They ought to know the road by this time," he began, with a laugh; then something in his wife's moved face seemed to strike him, and he added more soberly, "I see they have gone to the churchyard."  
And in the meantime, Ronald and Ethel Dare, with hearts too full for words, stood between the great vault of the Dares and the grave in which Florence Medwin lay at rest.

The harvest moon shed a pale glory over the quiet scene. Clearly visible as by the light of day, were the bronze letters on the marble shaft that told how "Florence Medwin," aged nineteen, had died nearly a decade ago, and those more freshly cut in brass, that told how Sir Bruce Dare of Dareholme lay below.  
Ethel thought of all that had been and was, of what might have been, but for the mercy of Heaven—thought of the night on which Bruce Dare had found her here and took her for the ghost of his dead love. She thought then that Heaven had sent her to comfort and help the stricken man, and she knew now that she had essayed to fulfill her mission in a spirit of romantic self-sacrifice.

A few prayerful words burst with a sob from her lips. She clasped both slender hands on Ronald's arm, and looked up into his face with eyes that had grown misty and dim.  
"What is it, my darling? Will you come away?" he asked tenderly, guessing how painful were her thoughts; but she shook her head.  
"Not just yet," she replied, with a broken sob. "I was thinking. It seems almost wrong, Ronald, that we should be so happy while they lie here."  
Ronald drew her to him; he loved her all the better for that tender half remorseful thought, though he knew well how baseless it was.  
"After life's fitful fever they sleep well. They do not envy us our happiness, Ethel, and they could never have shared it in this world."  
"Why?" Ethel asked eagerly. "They seemed to have so glad a life before them. And Bruce must have loved her very dearly, since, seven years after, he cared for her mere reflection in me."  
Ronald was silent for a second. Ethel was looking at the flowers on Florence Medwin's grave, or she might have been startled by the stern gravity of his face. Even to her, from whom her lover-husband kept no other secret, the story of Bruce Dare's frantic crime would never be told, but its memory cast a shadow over the young man's life that was never wholly lifted.

"Yes, he loved her," he said gravely, as Ethel raised her head; "but, after all, the story has its fittest ending here, for, strong and passionate and faithful as it was, poor Bruce's was always A MAD LOVE."  
THE END.

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