

# A Mad Love.

By the author of "Lover and Lord."

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

The thought was a natural one to visit her then, to sober the glad flow of her spirits and bring a softening shadow to her lovely face, as she pushed back the rustic gate of the church-yard and entered the quiet world in which Florence Medwin was sleeping.

The church was lighted, one slender ray shining from the turret window, but the organ was mute, and she guessed that Edith Challis had not yet arrived.

"I will wait for her here," she said to herself with a nod, and then, turning the angle of the church, made her way to her cousin's grave.

The tomb, with its lofty granite cross, its brazen railings, and carpet of choice flowers, stood out distinctly from its humbler fellows. As the bright moon-beams streamed across it now Ethel read the bronze words cut on the snowy shaft as clearly as she could have read them by the broad light of day. "Sacred to the memory of Florence Annie Medwin, aged nineteen; who was taken from her desolate parents and heart-broken lover on the eve of her wedding-day."

So, without allusion to the manner of her death, without vengeful or consolatory text, the brief epitaph ran. Ethel knew it by heart, but, as she read it now, the piteous pathos of the tale it told, of the young bride struck down in the fullness of her innocent joy, the cup of happiness untasted at her lips, and unavenged even yet, struck her once again, and tears of tenderest womanly compassion made her violet eyes grow dim.

"Poor Florrie!" she murmured, bending down to move a withered leaf from the big rose-tree's wealth of odorous bloom. "How sorry I am, how sorry every girl must be for you; and still more for him who loved you, and who must have loved you dearly, since he has been constant for seven long years! Do you pity him, and long to comfort him, Florrie? Is there any truth in Tennyson's pretty fancy, I wonder? Would your dust tremble and stir, and blossom in purple and red, if Bruce Dare came near your grave?"

Curious musings these for so frivolous, light-hearted a creature as most people took Ethel Ross-Trevor to be; but she was rather a curious girl—by no means to be read at once like the page of a printed book, and labeled off-hand, as most people discovered, when they knew her a little better. She was not in the least conscious of any unusual bravery or strength of character, yet few girls would have cared for her solitary vigil among the tombs. Even Edith Challis, who had the parson's daughter's easy familiarity with all things ecclesiastical, and regarded the churchyard as little more than an ornamental appendage to the Rectory grounds, would hardly have cared to linger in its path or amid its grass-grown hillocks under the chill, solemn splendor of the moon.

But Ethel Ross-Trevor, absorbedly dreaming of her cousin's tragic fate, literally did not think of herself at all, and had no place in her mind for selfish fear—did not even start or stumble when she heard a light quick step up the gravel, and knew that some one was approaching her from round the angle of the church. But, though it did not alarm her, the prosaic sound brought her back from Dream-land to common matter-of-fact speculation as to the new-comer's identity.

"Edith has brought the curate, I suppose, and yet—he has such a slouching, awkward tread! Perhaps it is Bertie."

The word died upon her lips as the new-comer emerged from the shadow, and came up to where she stood. With quick intuition she knew him then, and with an agonized pang of sympathy guessed what it must be to him to meet her there, Sir Bruce Dare!

She tried to speak, to warn him, but her heart beat with such sickening rapidity as almost to stop her breath. And, just as she was beginning to assure him that she was indeed a being of flesh and blood, she felt that all her bright tints were fading and that she grew more and more spectral like every second's space.

The man did not seem to see her, until he was so near that he could almost have touched her. She saw him walk rapidly on, with what seemed almost the blank stare of a somnambulist in his great melancholy eyes; she began almost to hope that she might slip away unseen, when suddenly he stopped, with a hoarse, dreadful cry—a cry that broke the spell that held the girl's faculties, and brought vividly before her the necessity for instant and decisive speech.

"You are mistaken," she said eagerly and hurriedly; but the man did not seem to heed or hear her. The first shock passed, he opened his eyes widely, and came toward her, with a strange rapturous light shining in them.

"Florrie—my darling—they have given you back to me at last!" he cried, his low musical voice thrilling with eager joy. "At last, at last!"

And, before Ethel could oppose any resistance, or even clearly guess his intention, he had clasped her in his arms, and

kissed her pale face again and again, with a desperate, half-cruel passion.

Brave as she was, Ethel felt her courage desert her now. A chill, paralyzing terror froze speech and thought, and deprived her of strength. For a few seconds she ceased to struggle, and lay passively in the man's close clasp, feeling the burning touch of his lips, conscious that his strange eyes were flaming into hers. Then suddenly strength and consciousness returned; she raised her dark head from its strange resting-place, and in her bewildered terror uttered a wild ringing cry for help.

She felt the man's clasp tighten almost savagely, saw his somber eyes flash, and then—oh, with what wild rapture she bailed their approach!—she saw Edith and Bertie Challis run up with pale scared faces, which grew paler still when they perceived her position.

The young soldier sprang forward with an indignant exclamation, and seized the man by the collar of his coat.

"You scoundrel!" he cried savagely. "Miss Ross-Trevor—you are not hurt?" "No, no," Ethel returned hurriedly, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. She was thinking not of herself, but of the man—whose arms had dropped mechanically by his side—who had in no way resisted young Challis's attack, or seemed even conscious of his presence, but stood staring mutely at her, with an anguished, pitifully-pleading look, that wrung the girl's warm heart.

"Oh, Ethel, darling, are you hurt?" Edith cried, with fearful agitation; while her brother, not knowing what else to do, repeated "You scoundrel!" in a vaguely threatening tone, and advanced toward the stolidly-defiant figure with a menace in his tightening fist.

Ethel saw the movement, and thrust herself promptly in between them.

"No, no—you are mad!" she exclaimed, pushing Bertie back, her eyes shining through her tears with an indignation inexplicable to the young man, who rather liked the idea of posing dramatically as the champion of beauty in distress—an indignation as inexplicable as was the exquisite tenderness that softened her voice and eyes as she turned once more to Bruce Dare. "I am so sorry you met me here," she said, with pathetic earnestness of explanation. "I am only Mrs. Medwin's niece."

He stared in stupid silence for a few moments, then suddenly the meaning of the words seemed to break upon him in full force; his eyes flashed, his face flushed a deep, burning red.

"Not Florrie!" he ejaculated hoarsely, and with startling emphasis. "And yet—her face—her voice—her very self—Oh, Heaven help me—I am mad!"

"No, no," Ethel cried; but the shock had been greater than the man's strength could bear—he staggered back a step or two as she approached him, and, stumbling against the low twisted railing, fell heavily to the ground at the girl's feet.

When Bertie Challis raised and propped him against the green bank, with his white face upturned to the pale splendor of the moonlit sky, he was quite insensible, though whether he had fainted before falling, or was simply stunned by the fall, it was impossible to say.

"Oh, what a handsome man!" whispered Miss Challis, all her sympathy enlisted now on behalf of the stranger she had so furiously condemned a moment back, when she saw the statuesque beauty of the fine worn face, the high-bred look of the man she had taken for an insolent tramp. "Poor fellow! Is he mad, Ethel, or what?"

Ethel's tears were raining down her pale cheeks, and falling upon the cold, inanimate face of Bruce Dare, as the girl bent over it, with an anguish of pity in her lovely eyes.

"Mad? No!" she answered, with a little passionate sob. "Oh, Edith, do you not understand? He found me at Florrie's grave, and evidently took me for Florrie's spirit, and he is—Sir Bruce Dare!"

"Sir Bruce Dare!" the brother and sister echoed simultaneously, with a not displeased excitement in their tone. Then Edith added in her quick authoritative fashion—

"Run back, Bertie, and tell the rector Sir Bruce Dare is here, and very ill."

## CHAPTER IX.

Bertie Challis's long legs carried him at a good pace over the springy turf and through the Rectory grounds, and the rector obeyed the call to attend the lord of the manor with commendable rapidity; but to Edith and Ethel the waiting seemed as though it would never end.

In Ethel's strained excited frame of mind she was almost inclined to blame herself for giving the cruel shock that had for the time deprived Bruce of sense and life.

"How he will hate me when he regains consciousness!" she thought, looking down at the calm face with a thrill of sharpest pain.

"Here comes Bertie—and here—yes, here is the rector too!" Miss Challis cried with an air of great relief. The rôle of silent and sympathetic watcher to which Ethel's reticence condemned her by no means commended itself to her.

"My dear Miss Ross-Trevor—what a distressing—what a painful adventure for you, and for Sir Bruce!" the rector said,

expressing his sympathy as well as his breathless condition would permit, alternately wringing Ethel's reluctant hand and glancing at the prostrate figure on the bank.

"Yes—yes," the girl responded feverishly; "but can you do nothing for Sir Bruce?"

Thus urged, the rector gave his undivided attention to the patient, who certainly needed it; and, under his not unskillful ministrations, Sir Bruce first stirred and breathed heavily, then opened his eyes, raised himself a little and looked uneasily round. As he did so, Ethel drew quickly out of sight, though she was still too deeply anxious to leave the place altogether, as she felt it would be wiser for her to do.

"That is well, Sir Bruce. Mr. Challis said cheerily. "You have had a nasty tumble, but there is no harm done."

Bruce put his hand to his head in a bewildered fashion, touching the wound the rough gravel had made; his brows and lips twitched as though in a painful effort at remembrance, while his eyes wandered from the portly clerical presence to Bertie's slim straight figure and Edith's pretty face.

On the latter they rested, as though he had found something of which he was in desperate search. "I remember," he said in a low tone, rising and turning to the girl with a grave courtesy that enchanted her. "I paid this young lady the compliment of taking her for a ghost, and frightened her in turn, I am afraid."

"Ah, no!" Edith declared, with a quick blush and smile. "You are mistaken; I did not come up till afterward. You saw Miss Ross-Trevor, Mrs. Medwin's niece."

"And the mistake in the circumstances was quite natural," the rector added soothingly; "for the young lady is said to bear a striking resemblance to her poor cousin, and finding her by the grave would have tried most men's nerves."

Bruce did not answer; but the old convulsive twitch disturbed his lips and brows, the old look of terror came back to the pathetic dark gray eyes. "There is Miss Ross-Trevor!" exclaimed Bertie, who having been so long silent, thought it high time that his voice should be heard.

Bitterly did Ethel regret that she had not found strength of mind to withdraw in time, and spare the man's weakened nerves a second shock; but regrets were useless, she had no choice but to appear now, to make the best of a bad business and comfort herself with the thought that sooner or later the difficulty must have been faced—the sooner perhaps the better.

She came hurriedly forward, her pretty face pale with emotion, her lovely eyes a little dim and misty, her lips apart—more like her dead cousin than ever in that moment, because her brighter tints had faded, and all her arch vivacity of expression was gone.

"Yes," she said rapidly—"it was I. I am so sorry—you must hate to see me, but—"

She paused then with a little convulsive cry and the look of a grieved child, for, without one word, with only one swift shuddering look of wild terror and aversion, Bruce Dare pushed roughly past her and, descending the path at headlong speed, was soon out of sight.

A brief silence followed his abrupt departure—a silence Bertie Challis was the first to break.

"Well," he exclaimed, with a disgusted whistle, "if our lord of the manor is not a downright lunatic he is a confounded cad! It strikes me a kicking would do him all the good in the world."

Ethel's eyes flashed indignantly; but before she could speak, the rector said in grave and slightly pompous tones of rebuke—

"Your levity is ill-timed, Albert, and your expressions are unbecoming. Sir Bruce left us in rather an abrupt fashion, I admit, and without that courteous recognition of our services that from a man of his birth and breeding we had perhaps a right to expect, but he was evidently laboring under strong emotion, and in such stress of feeling men do sometimes—"

"Act like cads—I grant it, governor," put in the young man with blithe irreverence. Bertie was impatient by nature, and could seldom stand the strain of what he called the "Parson's pulpit style" for long. "You do not suppose I wanted any humbugging show of gratitude to us," he went on; "but he need not have been so—so beastly rude to Miss Ross-Trevor. She could not help looking like her cousin—and a man who respects himself should contrive to be decently civil to all things feminine—even down to female ghosts." Then, turning to Ethel—"You look tired, Miss Ross-Trevor, and no wonder—this business must have upset you awfully, of course. Don't wait for the practice—let me take you home."

"Yes, do, and I will come with you. I have not courage enough to practice in the church to-night," Edith added cheerfully; and to this proposal Ethel gladly agreed.

The three young people stepped briskly out upon their moonlight walk, with thoughts and feelings diverging as widely, perhaps, as they well could. Miss Challis was all gleeful excitement and pleasurable anticipation; her brother wavered between excitement, admiration, and ill-temper; and Ethel was half stunned, and

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not yet quite sure that she was not walking and talking in a dream.

"Who would have thought, when you came out to-night, that you were destined to meet with such adventures?" Edith said. "How surprised Mr. and Mrs. Medwin will be!"

"Yes," Ethel answered curtly, she was thinking at the moment how she could tell the evening's story with the smallest amount of pain to them.

But she might have spared herself the pain of preparation—the story was not left for her to tell; Miss Challis had hardly crossed the threshold of the White House before, in a sensational and highly ornate fashion, she disburdened herself of her news.

"Poor Ethel—it was a dreadful trial to her, but she was very good and brave!" she concluded, in her rather patronizing fashion; and Mrs. Medwin glanced lovingly at her niece, as she remarked—

"Ethel is always that."

But Mr. Medwin, who had not his feelings under such perfect control, frowned and moved restlessly about the room, muttering from time to time, "Poor fellow! Poor Bruce!" in accents of deepest sympathy.

Edith raised her brows in surprise. "Bertie was quite cross with Sir Bruce Dare," she said demurely; "and he really was a little abrupt; but no doubt he will remember his lapse, and make amends to us all in time."

"No doubt," Mrs. Medwin agreed, with her unvarying gentleness, and the good nature that even irritating small talk at exciting moments could not disturb. "Sir Bruce Dare, as you will acknowledge when you know him better, Edith, is one of the kindest and most tender-hearted of men; I am sure that in his life he never wilfully wounded man, woman or child."

"I would swear to that," Mr. Medwin added emphatically; "and we ought to know something of Bruce Dare."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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