Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A MAD LOVE

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One

A Discontented Beauty

"Leone," cried a loud voice, "where are you? Here, there, everywhere, except just in the place where you should be."

The speaker was a tall, stout, good-tempered looking man. Farmer Noel people called him all over the country-side. He stood in the farmyard, looking all the warmer this warm day for his exertions in finding his niece.

"Leone," he cried again and again.

At last the answer came, "I am here, uncle," and if the first voice startled one with its loudness, this second was equally startling from its music, its depth, its pathos.

"I am here, uncle," she said. "I wish you would not shout so loudly. I am quite sure that the people at Rashleigh can hear you. What is it that you want?"

"Have you made up the packets of wheat I asked you for?" he said.

"No," she replied, "I have not."

He looked disappointed.

"I shall be late for market," he said. "I must do them myself."

He went back into the house without another word. He never reproached Leone, let her do what she would.

On Leone's most beautiful face were evident marks of bad temper, and she did not care to conceal it. With a gesture of impatience she started forward, passed over the farmyard and went through the gate out into the lane, from the lane to the high-road, and she stood there leaning over the white gate, watching the cattle as they drank from the deep, clear pool.

The sun shone full upon her, and the warm, sweet beams never fell on anything more lovely; the only drawback to the perfection of the picture was this: she did not look in harmony with the scene—the quiet English landscape, the golden cornfields, the green meadows, the great spreading trees whereon the birds sung, the tall spire of the little church, the quaint little town in the distance, the brook that ran gurgling by.

She looked out of harmony with them all; she would have been in perfect keeping had the background been of snow-capped mountains and foaming cascades. Here she looked out of place; she was on an English farm; she wore a plain English dress, yet she had the magnificent beauty of the daughters of sunny Spain. Her beauty was of a peculiar type—dark, passionate, and picturesque like that of the pomegranate, the damask rose or the passion-flower.

There was a world in her face—of passion, of genius, of power; a face as much out of place over the gates of a farm as a stately gladiolus would be among daisies and buttercups. An artist looking for a model of some great queen who had conquered the world, for some great heroine for whom men had fought madly and died, might have chosen her. But in a farmyard! there are no words to tell how out of place it was. She stood by the gate holding the ribbons of her hat in her hand—beautiful, imperious, defiant—with a power of passion about her that was perhaps her greatest characteristic.

She looked round the quiet picture of country life with unutterable contempt.

"If I could but fly away," she said; "I would be anything on earth if I could get away from this—I would not mind what; I would work, teaching, anything; the dull monotony of this life is killing me."

Her face was so expressive that every emotion was shown on it, every thought could be read there; the languid scorn of the dark eyes, and the proud curves of the daintily arched lips, all told of unconcealed contempt.

"A farm," she said to herself; "to think that when the world is full of beautiful places, my lot must be cast on a farm. If it had been in a palace, or a gypsy's camp—anywhere where I could have tasted life, but a farm."

The beautiful restless face looked contemptuously out on the green and fertile land.

"A farm means chickens running under one's feet, pigeons whirling round one's head, cows lowing, dogs barking, no conversation but crops——"

She stopped suddenly. Coming up the lane she saw that which had never gladdened her eyes here before; she saw a gentleman, handsome and young, walking carelessly down the high-road, and as he drew near, another gentleman, also handsome, but not quite so young, joined him.

They came laughing down the high-road together, but neither of them saw her until they reached the great elm-tree. The sight of that wondrous young face, with its rich, piquant beauty, startled them. One passed her by without a word, the other almost stopped, so entirely was he charmed by the lovely picture. As he passed he raised his hat; her beautiful face flushed; she neither smiled nor bowed in return, but accepted the salute as a tribute to her beauty, after the same fashion a queen acknowledges the salutes and homage of her subjects.

With one keen glance, she divided him from his companion, the man who had *not* bowed to her. She took in that one glance a comprehensive view. She knew the color of his eyes, of his hair, the shape of his face, the peculiar cut of his clothes, so different to those worn by the young farmers; the clustering hair, the clear-cut face, the delicate profile, the graceful ease of the tall, thin figure, were with her from that moment through all time.

The deep low bow gratified her. She knew that she was gifted with a wondrous dower of beauty. She knew that men were meek when a beautiful face charmed them. The involuntary homage of this handsome young man pleased her. She would have more of it. When he rejoined his companion, she heard him say:

"What a wonderful face, Euston—the most beautiful I have ever seen in my life."

That pleased her still more; she smiled to herself.

"Perhaps I shall see him again," she thought.

Then one of the girls from the village passed the gate, and stopped for a few minutes' conversation.

"Did you see those gentlemen?" asked the girl; and Leone answered:

"Yes."

"They have both come to live at Dr. Hervey's, to 'read,' whatever that means. The young one, with the fair hair, is a lord, the eldest son of a great earl; I do not remember the name."

So it was a great lord who had bowed to her, and thought her more beautiful than any one he had ever seen. Her heart beat with triumph.

She bade the girl good-morning, and went back. Her beautiful face was brilliant with smiles.

She entered the house and went up to her glass. She wanted to see again, for herself, the face he had called beautiful.

Mirrored there, she saw two dark eyes, full of fire, bright, radiant, and luminous—eyes that could have lured and swayed a nation; a beautiful, oval face, the features of which were perfect; a white brow, with dark, straight eyebrows; sweet, red lips, like a cloven rose; the most beautiful chin, with a rare dimple; an imperial face, suited for a queen's crown or the diadem of an empress, but out of place on this simple farm. She saw grand, sloping shoulders, beautiful arms, and a figure that was perfect in its symmetry and grace.

She smiled contentedly. She was beautiful, undoubtedly. She was glad that others saw it. If a young lord admired her, she must be worth admiring. Her good humor was quite restored.

How came it that this girl, with the beauty of a young princess, was at home in the farmhouse? It was a simple story. The farmer, Robert Noel, had only one brother, who loved romance and travel.

Stephen Noel, after trying every profession, and every means of obtaining a livelihood, at last decided on becoming a civil engineer; he went to Spain to help with a rail-road in the province of Andalusia, and there fell in love with and married a beautiful Andalusian, Pepita by name.

Dark-eyed Pepita died on the same day Leone was born, and the young father, distracted by his loss, took the child home to England. The old housekeeper at the Rashleigh farm took the girl, and Robert Noel consented that she should be brought up as a child of his own.

The two brothers differed as light and darkness differ. Stephen was all quickness and intelligence, Robert was stolid and slow. Leone always said it took him ten minutes to turn around. He had never married, he had never

found time; but he gave the whole love of his heart to the beautiful dark eyed child who was brought to his house sixteen years ago.

Two

"What, Marry a Farmer!"

One can imagine the sensation that a bright, beautiful eagle would produce in a dove's nest; the presence of that beautiful, imperious child at the farm was very much the same. People looked at her in wonder; her beauty dazzled them; her defiance amused them. They asked each other where all her pride came from.

Uncle Robert often said in his slow fashion that he retired from business when Leone was seven. At that early age he gave the management of everything into her baby hands. From the chickens in the yard to the blue and white pigeons on the roof. She could manage him, big as he was, with one stamp of her little foot, one flash of her bright eyes; he was powerless at once, like a great big giant bound hand and foot. She was a strange child, full of some wonderful power that she hardly understood herself—a child quite out of the common groove of life, quite above the people who surrounded her. They understood her beauty, her defiance, her pride, but not the dramatic instinct and power that, innate in her, made every word and action seem strange.

Honest, stolid Robert Noel was bewildered by her; he did his best in every way, but he had an uneasy consciousness that his best was but a poor attempt.

He sent her to school, the best in Rashleigh, but she learned anything and everything except obedience.

She looked out of place even there, this dark-eyed Spanish girl, among the pretty pink and white children with fair hair and blue eyes. She bewildered even the children; they obeyed her, and she had the greatest influence over them. She taught them recitations and plays, she fired their imaginations by wonderful stories; she was a new, brilliant, wonderful element in their lives. Even the school mistress, meek through the long suffering of years, even she worshiped and feared her—the brilliant, tiresome girl, who was like a flash of light among the others. She had a face so grand and a voice so thrilling it was no unusual thing when she was reading aloud in the school-room for the others to suspend all work, thrilled to the heart by the sound of her voice. She soon learned all that the Rashleigh governess could teach her—she taught herself even more. She had little taste for drawing, much for music, but her whole heart and soul were in books.

Young as she was, it was grand to hear her trilling out the pretty love speeches of Juliet, declaring the wrongs of Constance or Katherine, moaning out the woes of Desdemona. She had Shakespeare almost by heart, and she loved the grand old dramatist.

When she was sixteen her uncle took her from school, and then the perplexities of his honest life began. He wanted her to take her place as mistress of the house, to superintend the farm and the dairy, to take affectionate interest in the poultry and birds, to see that the butter was of a deep, rich yellow, and the new laid eggs sent to market. From the moment he intrusted those matters in her hands, his life became a burden to him, for they were entirely neglected.

Farmer Noel would go into his dairy and find everything wrong, the cream spilled, the butter spoiled; but when he looked at the dark-eyed young princess with the Spanish face he dared not say a word to her.

He would suggest to her meekly that things might be different. She would retaliate with some sarcasm that would reduce him to silence for two days at least. Yet she loved, after a fashion of her own, this great, stolid man who admired her with all his heart, and loved her with his whole soul.

So time passed until she was seventeen, and the quiet farm life was unendurable to her.

"Uncle," she would say, "let me go out into the world. I want to see it. I want something to do. I often think I must have two lives and two souls, I long so intensely for more than I have to fill them."

He could not understand her. She had the farm and the dairy.

"Be content," he would answer, "be content, my lady lass, with the home God has given you."

"I want something to do. If I did all the work on this and twenty other farms it would not touch my heart and soul. They are quite empty. People say it is a battlefield. If it be one, I am sitting by with folded hands. Inactivity means death to me."

"My lady lass, you can find plenty to do," he answered, solemnly.

"But not of the kind I want."

She paced up and down the large kitchen, where everything was polished and bright; the fire-light glowed on the splendid face and figure—the face with its unutterable beauty, its restless longing, its troubled desires.

Some fear for the future of the beautiful, restless, passionate girl came over the man, who watched her with anxious eyes. It began to dawn upon him, that if he were to shut a bright-eyed eagle up in a cage, it would never be happy,

and it was very much the same kind of thing to shut this lovely, gifted girl in a quiet farmhouse.

"You will be married soon," he said, with a clumsy attempt at comfort, "and then you will be more content."

She flashed one look of scorn from those dark, lustrous eyes that should have annihilated him. She stopped before him, and threw back her head with the gesture of an injured queen.

"May I ask," she said, "whom you suppose I will marry?"

He looked rather frightened, for he began to perceive he had made some mistake, though he could not tell what; he thought all young girls liked to be teased about sweethearts and marriage; still he came valiantly to the front.

"I mean that you will surely have a sweetheart some day or other," he said, consolingly, though the fire from those dark eyes startled him, and her scarlet lips trembled with anger.

"I shall have a sweetheart, you think, like Jennie Barnes or Lily Coke. A sweetheart. Pray, whom will it be, do you think?"

"I know several of the young farmers about here who would each give his right hand to be a sweetheart of yours."

She laughed a low, contemptuous laugh that made him wince.

"What, marry a farmer! Do you think the life of a farmer's wife would suit me? I shall go unmarried to my grave, unless I can marry as I choose."

Then she seemed to repent of the passionate words, and flung her beautiful arms round his neck and kissed his face.

"I hate myself," she said, "when I speak in that way to you, who have been so good to me."

"I do not mind it," said Robert Noel, honestly. "Never hate yourself for me, my lady lass."

She turned one glance from her beautiful eyes on him.

"When I seem to be ungrateful to you, do remember that I am not, Uncle Robert; I am always sorry. I cannot help myself, I cannot explain myself; but I feel always as though my mind and soul were cramped."

"Cramp is a very bad thing," said the stolid farmer.

She looked at him, but did not speak; her irritation was too great; he never understood her; it was not likely he ever would.

"I will go down to the mill-stream," she said.

With an impatient gesture she hastened out of the house.

The mill-stream was certainly the prettiest feature of the farm—a broad, beautiful stream that ran between great rows of alder-trees and turned the wheel by the force with which it leaped into the broad, deep basin; it was the loveliest and most picturesque spot that could be imagined, and now as the waters rushed and foamed in the moonlight they were gorgeous to behold.

Leone loved the spot; the restless, gleaming waters suited her; it seemed to have something akin to herself—something restless, full of force and vitality. She sat there for hours; it was her usual refuge when the world went wrong with her.

Round and round went the wheel; on sunlight days the sun glinted on the sullen waters until they resembled a sheet of gold covered with white, shining foam. Green reeds and flowers that love both land and water fringed the edges of the clear, dimpling pool; the alder-trees dipped their branches in it; the great gray stones, covered with green moss, lay here and there. It was a little poem in itself, and the beautiful girl who sat in the moonlight read it aright.

Three

The Meeting at the Mill

In the depths of the water she saw the reflection of the shining stars; she watched them intently; the pure, pale golden eyes. A voice aroused her—a voice with tone and accent quite unlike any other voice.

"I beg your pardon," it said, "could you show me the way to Rashleigh? I have lost myself in the wood."

Raising her eyes she saw the gentleman who had raised his hat as he passed her in the morning. She knew that he recognized her by the light that suddenly overspread his face.

"Rashleigh lies over there," she replied. "You have but to cross the field and pass the church."

"Even that," said the stranger, with a careless laugh, "even that I am not inclined to do now. It is strange. I am afraid you will think me half mad, but it seems to me that I have just stepped into fairy land. Two minutes since I was on the bare highway, now I see the prettiest picture earth has to offer."

"It is pretty," she replied, her eyes looking at the clear, dimpling pool; "prettier now even than when the sun shines on it and the wheel turns."

She had told him the way to Rashleigh, and he should have passed on with a bow, but this was his excuse. The moon was shining bright as day, the wind murmured in the alder trees, the light lay on the clear, sweet, fresh water; the music of the water as it fell was sweet to hear. Away in the woods some night bird was singing; the odor of the sleeping flowers filled the air; and there on the green bank, at the water's edge, sat the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life.

The moonlight fell on her exquisite southern face; it seemed to find its home in the lustrous depths of her dark eyes; it kissed the dark ripples of her hair, worn with the simple grace of a Greek goddess; it lay on the white hands that played with the tufted grass.

He was young and loved all things beautiful, and therefore did not go away. His mind was filled with wonder. Who was she—this girl, so like a young Spanish princess! Why was she sitting here by the mill-stream? He must know, and to know he must ask.

"I am inclined," he said, "to lie down here by this pretty stream, and sleep all night under the stars; I am so tired."

She looked at him with a quick, warm glow of sympathy.

"What has tired you?" she asked.

He sat down on one of the great gray stones that lay half in the water, half on the land.

"I have lost myself in the Leigh woods," he said. "I have been there many hours. I had no idea what Leigh woods were like, or I should not have gone for the first time alone."

"They are very large and intricate," she said; "I can never find the right paths."

“Some one told me I should see the finest oak-trees in England there,” he said, “and I have a passion for grand old oaks. I would go anywhere to see them. I went to the woods and had very soon involved myself in the greatest difficulties. I should never have found the way out had I not met one of the keepers.”

She liked to listen to him; the clear, refined accent, the musical tone; as she listened a longing came over her that his voice might go on speaking to her and of her.

“Now,” he continued, embarrassed by her silence, “I have forgotten your directions; may I ask you to repeat them?”

She did so, and looking at her face he saw there was no anger, nothing but proud, calm content. He said to himself he need not go just yet, he could stay a few minutes longer.

“Do you know that beautiful old German ballad,” he said,

“‘In sheltered vale a mill-wheel Still tunes its tuneful lay’?”

“No; I never heard or read it,” she answered. “Say it for me.”

“‘In sheltered vale a mill-wheel Still tunes its tuneful lay. My darling once did dwell there, But now she’s far away. A ring in pledge I gave her, And vows of love we spoke— Those vows are all forgotten, The ring asunder broke.’”

“Hush,” she said, holding up one white hand; “hush, it is too sad. Do you not see that the moonlight has grown dim, and the sound of the falling waters is the sound of falling tears?”

He did not seem to understand her words.

“That song has haunted me,” he said, “ever since I heard it. I must say the last verse; it must have been of this very mill-wheel it was written.

“‘But while I hear the mill-wheel My pains will never cease; I would the grave could hide me, For there alone is peace.’”

“Is it a love story?” she asked, pleased at the pathos and rhythm of the words.

“Yes; it is the usual story—the whole love of a man’s heart given to one not worthy of it, the vows forgotten, the ring broken. Then he cries out for the grave to hide himself and his unhappy love.”

She looked up at him with dark, lustrous, gleaming eyes.

“Does all love end in sorrow?” she asked, simply.

He looked musingly at the moonlit waters, musingly at the starlit sky.

“I cannot tell,” he replied, “but it seems to me that it ends more in sorrow than in joy. I should say,” he continued, “that when truth meets truth, where loyalty meets loyalty, the ending is good; but where a true heart finds a false one, where loyalty and honor meet lightness and falsehood, then the end must be bad.”

Leone seemed suddenly to remember that she was talking to a stranger, and, of all subjects, they had fallen on love.

“I must go,” she said, hurriedly. “You will remember the way.”

“Pray do not go—just this minute,” he said. “History may repeat itself; life never does. There can never be a night half so fair as this again; the water will never fall with so sweet a ripple; the stars will never shine with so bright a light; life may pass, and we may never meet again. You have a face like a poem. Stay a few minutes longer.”

“A face like a poem.” Did he really think so?

The words pleased her.

“Strange things happen in real life,” he said; “things that, told in novels and stories, make people laugh and cry out that they are exaggerated, too romantic to be real. How strange that I should have met you here this evening by the

side of the mill-stream—a place always haunted by poetry and romance. You will think it stranger still when I tell you your face has haunted me all day."

She looked at him in surprise. The proud, beautiful face grieved at the words.

"How is that?" she asked.

"I saw you this morning when I was going to Rashleigh with my friend, Sir Frank Euston. You were standing against a white gate, and I thought—well, I must not tell you what I thought."

"Why?" she asked, briefly.

"Because it might offend you," he replied.

He began to perceive that there was no coquetry in this beautiful girl. She was proud, with a calm, serene, half-tragic pride. There would be no flirtation by the side of the mill-stream. She looked as far above coquetry as she was above affectation. He liked the proud calm of her manner. She might have been a duchess holding court rather than a country girl sitting by a mill-wheel. The idea occurred to him; and then his wonder increased—who was she? and what was she doing here?

"Do you live near here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "behind the trees there you can see the chimneys of a farmhouse; it is called Rashleigh Farm; my uncle, Robert Noel, lives there; and I am his niece."

"His niece," repeated the young man, in an incredulous voice. She was a farmer's niece, then, after all; and yet she looked like a Spanish princess.

"You do not look like an English girl," he said, gravely.

"My father was English and my mother a Spanish lady; and I—well, I fear I have more of the hot fire of Spain than of the chill of England in my nature; my face is Spanish, so is my heart."

"A Spaniard is quick to love, quick to hate; forgives grandly and revenges mercilessly," he said.

"That is my character," she said; "you have described it exactly."

"I do not believe it; neither hate nor revenge could exist with a face like yours. Then your name is Noel?"

"Yes, my name is Leone Noel," she replied.

"Leone," he repeated, "that is a beautiful name. I have never heard it before; but I like it very much; it is musical and rare—two great things in a name."

"It is a German name," she said. "My uncle Robert hates it; he says it reminds him of Lion; but you know it is pronounced Leon. My mother read some German story that had the name in it and gave it to me."

"It suits you," he said, simply; "and I should not think there was another name in the world that would. I wonder," he added, with a shy laugh, "if you would like my name? It is Lancelot Chandos. My friends call me Lance."

"Yes, I like that. I know all the history of Sir Lancelot. I admire him; but I think he was a weak man—do not you?"

"For loving Queen Guinevere? I do not know. Some love is strength, not weakness," he replied.

Leone looked up at him again.

"Are you the son of a great lord?" she asked; "some one told me so."

"Yes; my father is Earl of Lanswell; and people would call him a great earl. He is rich and powerful."

"What has brought you, the son of a great earl, down to Rashleigh?" she asked.

"My own idleness, to begin with," he said. "I have been at Oxford more years than I care to count; and I have idled my time."

"Then you are studying?" she said.

“Yes, that is it. I am trying to make up for lost time. I have some examinations to pass; and my father has sent me down to Dr. Hervey because he is known everywhere as the cleverest coach in England.”

A cloud came for just one half minute across the face of the moon; the soft, sweet darkness startled Leone.

“I must go now,” she said; “it is not only getting late, but growing dark.”

“I shall see you again,” he cried, “do promise me.”

“Nay, you have little faith in promises,” she replied; and he watched her as she vanished from among the alder-trees.

It was an unexpected meeting; and strange and startling consequences soon followed.

Four

An Interesting Tete-a-Tete

"Where have you been, Leone?" asks Farmer Noel.

She had begun a new life. It seemed years since she had left him, while he sat in the same place, smoking the same pipe, probably thinking the same thoughts. She came in with the brightness and light of the moon in her face; dew-drops lay on her dark hair, her beautiful face was flushed with the wind, so fair, so gracious, so royal, so brilliant. He looked at her in helpless surprise.

"Where have you been?" he repeated.

She looked at him with a sweet, dreamy smile.

"I have been to the mill-stream." And she added in a lower tone, "I have been to heaven."

It had been heaven to her—this one hour spent with one refined by nature and by habit—a gentleman, a man of taste and education. Her uncle wondered that evening at the light that came on her face, at the cheerful sound of her voice, the smile that came over her lips. She was usually so restless and discontented.

It was a break in her life. She wanted something to interrupt the monotony, and now it had come. She had seen and spoken to not only a very handsome and distinguished man, but a lord, the son of an earl. He had admired her, said her face was like a poem; and the words brought a sweet, musing smile to her face.

When the sun shone in her room the next morning she awoke with a sense of something new and beautiful in her life; it was a pleasure to hear the birds sing; a pleasure to bathe in the clear, cold, fresh water; a pleasure to breathe the sweet, fragrant morning air. There was a half wonder as to whether she could see him again.

The poetical, dramatic instinct of the girl was all awake; she tried to make herself as pretty as she could. She put on a dress of pale pink—a plain print, it is true, but the beautiful head and face rose from it as a flower from its leaves.

She brushed back the rippling hair and placed a crimson rose in its depths. Then she smiled at herself. Was it likely she should see him? What should bring the great son of an earl to the little farm at Rashleigh? But the blue and white pigeons, the little chickens—all fared well that morning. Leone was content.

In the afternoon Farmer Noel wanted her to go down to the hay-fields. The men were busy with the newly mown hay, and he wished her to take some messages about the stacking of it. She looked like a picture of summer as she walked through the green, shady lane, a red rose in her hair and one in her breast, a cluster of woodbine in her hand. She saw nothing of Lord Chandos, yet she thought of nothing else; every tree, every field, every lane she passed she expected to see him; but of course he was not there; and her heart beat fast as she saw him—he was crossing what people called the Brook Meadow—and she met him face to face.

They had met for the first time on a moonlight night; they met for the second time on a sultry summer afternoon, when the whole world seemed full of love. The birds were singing of love in the trees, the butterflies were making love to the flowers, the wind was whispering of love to the trees, the sun was kissing the earth that lay silent in its embrace.

"Leone," he cried; and then he flushed crimson. "I beg your pardon," he said, "but I ought to say Miss Noel; but I have been thinking of you all night as Leone. I did not think of it before I spoke."

She laughed at the long apology.

"Say it all over again," she said. "Begin at 'Good-afternoon, Miss Noel.'"

He repeated it after her, then added:

"I think my kind and good fortune sent me this way. I was longing for some one to speak to—and of all happiness to meet you; but perhaps you are busy."

"No; I have done all that I had to do. I am never busy," she added, with regal calm.

He smiled again.

"No; I could not fancy you busy," he said, "any more than I could fancy the goddess Juno in a hurry. To some fair women there belongs by birthright a calm that is almost divine."

"My calm covers a storm," she replied. "My life has been brief and dull; neither my heart nor my soul has really lived; but I feel in myself a capability of power that sometimes frightens me."

He did not doubt it as he looked at the beautiful, passionate face; it was even more lovely in the gleam of the sunlight than in the soft, sweet light of the moon.