

# Old Man's Darling.

BY MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER,

AUTHOR OF "QUEENIE'S TERRIBLE SECRET," "JACQUELINE," ETC.

## CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"It has all come true," she thought, turning from the circle around her, and looking wistfully out over the waves that came swelling against the shore, like some wild heart beating against the bars of life—"It has all come true—yet how little I dreamed that she could read the future that lies folded, like the leaves of a book, from first sight. How little I thought that a shadow could ever fall between me and happiness! Yet in a few short months her wild prediction has been fulfilled. I have drunk deeply of sorrow's cup. I have been a young man's bride; now they say I am an old man's darling. All—has been fulfilled save the shame and disgrace with which she threatened me. But that can never come, never, never!" and a look of pride came over the fair face, and the round throat was curved defiantly.

Colonel Carlyle was quite happy and proud at first over the sensation created by his beautiful girl-wife. He liked to see how much people admired her. It pleased him to note the admiring glances that followed her slightest movement.

She belonged to him, and all the admiration she excited was a tribute to his taste and his pride.

For a whole week he was as pleased and happy as a man could be, but a shadow fell upon him with the coming of Felise. He grew morbidly jealous.

Jealous, and without a shadow of reason, for Bonibel was like the chaste and lovely moon—she shone coldly and alike upon all.

But the colonel became a changed man—everyone noticed it, and many said that the old man was growing jealous of his beautiful darling.

But no one could tell how it came about, not even Felise Herbert, who, when questioned by her mother, refused to admit that the faintest, most insidious hint from her lips had been dropped like poison into the cup of perfect happiness from which the dotting old husband was fondly drinking.

One morning a note lay on his dressing-table—a little note scrawled in a disguised hand—he took it up and read it, then put it down again and stood gazing blankly at it as if it were the death-warrant of his happiness. It was very short, but every word was stamped indelibly on his memory.

"Your wife," it ran, "wears a little opal ring on the third finger of her right hand. She prizes it more than all the costly jewels you have lavished upon her. It was the gift of a former lover whom she still adores. Ask her to cease wearing the ring, or even to show you the inscription inside, and you will see who has the warmest place in her heart."

Could this be true? Was this a friend who warned him, he thought. He remembered the pretty little ring perfectly.

The jealous pang that had been tearing at his heart for days grew sharper than ever.

He knew his wife did not love him yet, but he had fondly hoped to win her heart in time.

If what the writer of that anonymous letter said was true, then it was vain to hope any longer.

"A former lover whom she still adored." Oh! God, could that be true?

"I will test her," he said to himself. "No one shall poison my mind against my beautiful wife without a cause. I will put it to the test and win or lose it all."

He went to a jeweler's that morning and came back with a little box in his vest-pocket.

Then he asked Bonibel if she would walk down to the seashore with him.

She complied with a gentle smile, and he found her a shady seat a little off from the crowd, where they could talk uninterupted.

She laid down her parasol, and removing her delicate gloves folded her white hands listlessly together.

Colonel Carlyle took up the hand that wore the opal ring and looked at it fondly.

"My dear," he said, "that is a very pretty ring you wear, but it is not beautiful enough for your perfect hand. I have brought you a much handsomer one with which to replace it."

He took it from his pocket and showed it to her—a lovely, shimmering opal set round with gleaming pearls.

"I have heard that opals are unlucky stones," he said, "but if you are not superstitious, and like to wear them, will you lay aside the simple one you now have and put this on instead?" and he made a movement as if he would withdraw the taboed one from her finger.

Bonibel withdrew her hand quickly, and looked up into Colonel Carlyle's face.

He saw her delicate lips quiver and a dimness creep over her eyes, while her cheeks grew, if anything, paler than ever. Her voice trembled slightly as she answered:

"I thank you for your beautiful gift; but I cannot consent to wear it in the place of the plainer one I now have."

"And why not, my dear little wife? It would look much handsomer than the one you now wear on your finger."

A faint flash tinged her snow-white cheek at the half-sarcastic emphasis of his words. Her glance wandered off to the sunlit sea, and a tear rolled down her cheek as she said, very gently:

"I am quite aware of that, Colonel Carlyle. Your ring is a marvel of beauty and taste, and I will wear it on another finger if you like; but I prize the other more for its associations than for its beauty or value. It was a keepsake from a friend: You remember the pretty words of the old song:

"Who has not kept some trifling thing,  
More prized than jewels rare,  
A faded flower, a broken ring,  
A tress of golden hair?"

There was a tone of unconscious pleading in her pathetic voice, and the heart of the jealous old husband gave a throb of pain as he listened.

"It is true, then," he thought to himself. "It was a gift of a former lover."

Aloud he said rather coldly: "Since you prize it so much as a keepsake, Bonibel, put it away in some secret place, and preserve it as romantic people do such treasures—it will be safer thus."

"I prefer to wear it, sir," she answered, with a glance of surprise at the persistency.

"But I do not wish you to wear it. I particularly desire that you should lay it aside and wear the one I have brought you instead," he insisted, rather sharply goaded on by jealousy and dread.

Bonibel turned her eyes away from the blue waves of the ocean and looked curiously at her husband. She saw that he was in desperate earnest. His dark eyes flashed with almost the fire of youth, and his features worked with some inward emotion she did not in the least understand.

"I am sorry to refuse your request, sir," she answered, a little gravely; "though I am surprised that you should insist upon it when I have plainly expressed a contrary wish. I can only repeat what I have said before, that I prefer to wear it."

"Against my wishes, Bonibel!" "I hope that you will not further oppose it, sir, on the ground of a mere caprice," she answered, flushing warmly. "It was the gift of a dear friend, who is dead, and I shall always wear it in remembrance."

"The gift of a former lover, perhaps," sneered Colonel Carlyle, half beside himself with jealousy.

"I suppose it cannot matter to you, Colonel Carlyle, who the giver may have been," exclaimed Bonibel, offended at his overbearing tone, and flushing indignantly.

"Pardon me, but it does matter, Bonibel. I dislike exceedingly to see my wife wearing the ring of one whom she loves better than her husband! Common regard for my feelings should induce you to lay it aside without forcing me to issue a command to that effect."

His jealous pain or innate tyranny was fast getting the better of his prudence, or he would scarcely have taken such a tone with the young wife whose heart he so ardently longed to win. She sprang up impetuously and looked down at him with the fires of awakened resentment burning hotly upon her cheeks, looking beautiful with the glow and warmth of passion in the face that had been too cold and pale before. The same proud spirit that had forced her to defy her Uncle Francis that memorable night animated her now.

"I think you will hardly dare issue such a command to me, Colonel Carlyle. Remember that though I am your wife I am not your slave!"

How fair she looked in his eyes even as she indignantly defied his authority! But passion had made him blind to reason and justice. With a swift glance around to assure himself that no one was in sight, he caught her small hand and tried to wrench the ring from her finger by force.

"At least I will see whose hated name is written within the precious jewel!" he exclaimed.

"Release me, this moment, Colonel Carlyle! If you dare to persevere in such a cowardly and brutal course, I swear to you that I will never live with you another day! Yes, I would leave you within the hour were I twice your wife!" cried the girl, in such passionate wrath and scorn that the colonel let go of her hand in sicer surprise at the transformation of his dove.

"You would not dare do such a thing!" he exclaimed, vehemently.

"Would I not?" she answered, with flashing eyes. "I dare do anything! Beware how you put me to the test!"

He stood glaring at her with rage and

malignity distorting his aristocratic features. How dared that feeble, puny girl defy him thus?

For a moment he almost hated her. A sleeping devil was aroused within his heart.

"Bonibel," he exclaimed angrily, "you shall repent this hour in dust and ashes!" All the latent fire and scorn of the girl's passionate nature were fanned into flame by his threatening words.

"I care nothing for your threat," she answered, haughtily. "I defy you to do your worst! Such threats do honor to your manhood when addressed to a weak and helpless girl! See how little I prize the gift of one who could act in so unmanly a way."

She stooped and caught up his ring where it had fallen on the sands in all its shining beauty. She made a step forward towards the water, her white hand flashed in the air a moment, and the costly jewel fell shimmering into the sea.

They stood a moment looking at each other in silence—the girl reckless, defiant, like a young lioness at bay; the man astonished, indignant, yet still thrilled with a sort of inexpressible admiration of her beauty and her daring. He saw in her that moment some of the dauntless courage of her hero-father. The same proud, untamed spirit flashed from her glorious eyes. It flashed across him suddenly and humiliatingly that he had been a fool to try such high-handed measures with General Vere's daughter—he might have known that the same unconquerable fire burned in her veins. He had seen Harry Vere go into the battle with the same look on his face—the same flashing eye, the same dilated nostril and disdainful lip.

He went up to her, thrilled with momentary compunction for his fault, and took her hand in his.

"You were right, Bonibel," he said, humbly. "I acted like a coward and a brute. I was driven mad by jealousy. Can you forgive me, darling?"

"I accept your apology, sir," she answered, coldly; but there was little graciousness and much pride in her manner. Her pride had been outraged almost past forgiveness.

## CHAPTER XIX.

Colonel Carlyle keeps the peace for several days. He finds that he has overstepped the mark and that it will take careful management to regain his lost ground in his wife's regard. Bonibel, though she married him without a spark of love, has yet given him a very frank and tender regard and esteem until now. She has always thought him a perfect gentleman, a model of courtesy and propriety, and as such she has given him all that was left in her heart to give—the reverence and affection of a dutiful daughter. Now, without a moment's warning, her ideal has fallen from the proud pedestal where she had placed it—its shattered fragments bestrewed the ground, and she knows, if he does not, that the broken image can never be restored.

He has deceived her, she tells herself bitterly, but now that he has won her, the mask of courtliness is laid aside, and he shows the iron hand that was hidden beneath the velvet glove.

But a few short weeks had fled, and he begins to play the tyrant already.

Her passionate, undisciplined nature rises up in hot rebellion against his injustice. The foolish jealousy of his old age appears very contemptible to her youthful eyes. She does not try to excuse it to herself. A great revulsion of feeling comes over her, chilling the gentle growth of tenderness and gratitude in her heart. Her manner grows cold, reserved, almost offensively haughty.

Ere his first cloud on the matrimonial horizon clears away the grand ball of the season comes off. The gay visitors at Long Branch dance every night, but this is to be the most brilliant affair of any—a "full dress affair" is what the ladies call it—meaning to say that they wear their finest dresses and costliest jewels—the gentlemen likewise.

The night is cloudless, balmy, beautiful—such nights as we have in the last of July when the moon is full and Heaven marials its host of stars in the illimitable canopy above. The spacious ball-room is thronged with revelers. The dreamy, passionate strains of waltz-music float out upon the air, filling it with melody.

Standing beside a window is Colonel Carlyle, in elegant evening dress, looking very stately and distinguished despite his seventy years. Leaning on his arm is Felise Herbert, looking radiant in rose-colored satin and gauze, with a diamond fillet clasping her dark hair, and diamonds shining, like dew on her bare throat and rounded arms. Smiles dimple her red lips as she watches the animated scene about her, and her dark eyes shine like stars. Her companion thinks that he never saw her half so handsome before as she haugs on his arm and chatters airy nothings in his ears.

"Look at our little Bonibel," she says, in a tone of innocent amusement; "is she not a demure little coquette? She looks like a veritable snow-maiden, as cold and as pure, yet she has young Penn inextricably prisoned in her coils, and everyone knows it—no one better than herself."

His glance follows hers across the room to where his young wife stands a little outside the giddy circle of waltzers, leaning on the arm of a handsome, dreamy-

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looking youth, and despite the jealous pang that thrills him at Felise's artful speech, his heart throbs with a great love and pride at her exceeding beauty.

She looks like a snow-maiden, indeed, as her enemy says. She wears costly white lace over her white silk, and her cheeks and brow, her arms and shoulders are white as her dress. Colonel Carlyle's wedding gift, a magnificent set of diamonds, adorns her royally. There is not a flower about her, nothing but silk and laces and costly gems, yet withal, she makes you think of a lily, she looks so white, and cold, and pure in the whirl of rainbow hues around her.

Her companion bends toward her, speaking earnestly, yet she listens with such apparent indifference and almost *ennui* that if that be coquetry at all it can surely be characterized by no other term than that of Felise—"demure."

"I thought that Penn's loves were all ideal ones," the colonel says, trying to speak carelessly as he watches his wife's companion closely. "To judge from his latest volumes of poems, the divinities of his worship are all too ethereal to tread this lower earth."

Felise laughs significantly as her companion ceases to speak.

"Byron Penn, despite the ethereal creatures of his brain, is not proof against mortal beauty," she says. "Remember, Colonel Carlyle, that angels once looked down from Heaven and loved the women of earth."

"He is a graceful waltzer," her companion returns, as the young poet circles the waist of the snow-maiden with one arm and whirls her into the mazes of the giddy, breathless waltz.

"Very," says Felise, watching the graceful couple as they float around the room, embodying the very poetry of motion.

She is silent a moment, then looks up into her companion's face with a slightly curious expression.

"Pardon my question, she says thoughtfully; "but do you quite approve of married women waltzing with other men than their husbands?"

He starts and looks at her sharply. The innocent deference and unconsciousness of her voice and face are perfect.

"Since you ask me," he says, slowly, "I may say that upon mature consideration I might think it was not exactly *comme il faut*. Yet I have really never before given a second thought to the subject. It is quite customary, you know, and it seems even more excusable in my wife than other women, since I never waltz myself, and she would be compelled to forego that pleasure entirely unless she shared it with others."

"Oh, pray do not think that I have any reference to Bonibel," exclaimed Felise, hurried and earnestly. "I was speaking altogether in the abstract. Yet I fully agree with you that your wife would be more excusable for many little errors of head and heart than most women. She is scarcely more than a child, and has never had the proper training to fit her for her present sphere. Her uncle was culpably indulgent to her, and hated to force her inclination, which was very adverse to study or application of any kind. Consequently our little Bonibel, though beautiful as a dream, is little more than an unformed child. She should be in the school room this minute."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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