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Old Man's Darling.

BY MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER,
AUTHOR OF "QUEENIE'S TERRIBLE SECRET," "JACQUELINE," ETC.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

"Be quiet, Lucy; my head aches," said Bonibel, thinking it very improper for the girl to discuss her superior's affairs so freely; she therefore dismissed the subject and thought no more about it, little dreaming that it was one portentous of evil to herself.

Felise need not have troubled herself with the fear of Bonibel's rivalry. The young girl was only too willing to be kept in the background. In the seclusion which Mrs. Arnold deemed it proper to observe after their dreadful and tragic bereavement they received but few visitors and Bonibel was glad that her recent illness was considered a sufficient pretext for denying herself to even these few. Some there were—a few old friends and one or two loving schoolmates—who refused to be denied and whom Bonibel reluctantly admitted, but these few found her so changed in appearance and broken in spirit that they went away marveling at her persistent grief for the uncle whom the world blamed very much because he had failed to provide for her as became her birth and position.

But while the world censured Mr. Arnold's neglect of her, Bonibel never blamed her uncle by word or thought. She believed what he had told her on the memorable evening of his death. He had provided for her, she knew, and the will, perhaps, had been lost. What had become of it she could not conjecture, but she was far from imputing foul play to anyone. The thought never entered her mind. She was too pure and innocent herself to suspect evil in others, and the overwhelming horror of her uncle's tragic death still brooded over her spirit to the utter exclusion of all other cares save one, and that one a sore, sore trial that it needed all her energies to endure, the silence of Leslie Dane and her anxieties regarding his fate; for still the days waned and faded and no tidings came to the sick heart that waited in passionate suspense for a sign from the loved and lost one.

Strange to say, she had never learned the fatal truth that Leslie Dane stood charged with her uncle's murder, and that justice was still on the alert to discover his whereabouts. During her severe and nearly fatal illness all approach to the subject of the murder had been prohibited by the careful physician, and on her convalescence the newspapers had been excluded from her sight and the subject tabooed in her presence. She had forgotten the solemn charge of Felise Herbert and her mother that fatal night which she had so indignantly refuted. Now she was spared the knowledge that the malignity of the two women had succeeded in fixing the crime on the innocent head of the man she loved. Had Bonibel known that fact she would have left Mrs. Arnold's roof although starvation and death had been the inevitable consequence. But she did not know, and so moped and pined in her chamber, tearful and utterly despairing, oblivious to the fact that she was doing what Felise most desired in thus secluding herself.

CHAPTER IX.

A blind chance at last brought about the fatal meeting between Bonibel Vere and Colonel Carlyle which Felise Herbert so greatly dreaded and deprecated.

As the autumn months merged into winter Bonibel had developed a new phase of her trouble. A great and exceeding restlessness took possession of her.

She no longer moped in her chamber, thinking and thinking on the one subject that began to obscure even the memory of her Uncle Francis. She had brooded over Leslie's strange silence until her brain reeled with agony—now a strange longing for oblivion and forgetfulness took hold upon her.

"Oh! for that fabled Lethæan draught which men drink and straightway all the past is forgotten!" she would murmur wildly as she paced the floor, wringing her beautiful hands and weeping. "Either Leslie has deserted me or he is dead. In either case it is wretchedness to remember him! Oh! that I could forget!"

Shrouded in her thick veil and long cloak she began to take long rambling walks every day, returning weary and fatigued, so that sleep, which for awhile had deserted her pillow, began to return, and in long and heavy slumbers she would lose for a little while the memory of the handsome artist, so deeply loved in that brief and beautiful summer. Those days were gone forever. Her brief spring of happiness was over. It seemed to her that the only solace that remained to her weary heart was forgetfulness.

Once, rendered desperate by her suspense, she had written a letter to Leslie—a long and loving letter, full of tender reproaches for his silence, and containing the whole story of her uncle's tragic death. She had begged him to send her just one little line to assure her that she was not

forgotten, and this beautiful little letter, filled with the pure thoughts of her innocent heart, she had directed to Rome, Italy.

No answer came to that yearning cry from the aching heart of the little wife. She waited until hope became a hideous mockery. She began to think how strange it was that she, little Bonibel Vere, who looked so much like a child, with her short hair and baby-blue eyes, was really a wife. But for the shining opal ring with its pretty inscription, "Mizpah," which Leslie had placed upon her finger that night, she would have begun to believe that it was all a fevered dream.

She was thinking of that ring one day as she walked along the crowded street, filled with eager shopper, for Christmas was drawing near, and people were busy providing holiday gifts for their dear ones. "Mizpah!" she repeated to herself, walking heedlessly along the wet and sleety pavement. "That means 'the Lord watch between thee and me while we are absent one from another.' Oh, Leslie, Leslie!"

Absorbed in painful thoughts she began to quicken her steps, quite forgetful of the thin sheet of ice that covered the pavement, and which required very careful walking. How it happened she could not think, but the next moment she felt one ankle twisting suddenly beneath her with a dreadful pain in it, and found herself falling to the ground. With an exclamation of terror she tried to recover her balance, but vainly. She lay extended on the ground, her hat and veil falling off, and exposing her beautiful pale face with its clustering locks of sunny hair.

People crowded around her immediately, but the first to reach her was a gentleman who was coming out of a jewelry store in front of which she had slipped and fallen.

He lifted her up tenderly, and a woman restored her hat and veil.

Bonibel tried to stand upon her feet and thank them both for their timely aid.

To her terror a sharp twinge of pain in her ankle warned her that she could not stand upon it. She uttered a cry of pain and her blue eyes filled with quick tears.

"I—I fear my ankle is sprained," she said, "I cannot stand upon it."

"Never mind," said the gentleman, melted by the tears and the beauty of the sufferer. "Here is my carriage and the curbstone. Give me your address and I will take you home immediately."

Bonibel was growing so faint from the pain of her sprained ankle that she could scarcely speak, but she murmured brokenly: "Fifth Avenue, number—," and with a slight exclamation of surprise he lifted her into the carriage and gave the order to the driver.

She leaned her head back against the satin cushions of the carriage and closed her eyes wearily!

"I beg your pardon," said her companion's voice, arousing her suddenly from the deathly faintness that was stealing over her, "but I think you must be Miss Bonibel Vere, Mrs. Arnold's niece. Perhaps you have heard her mention me. I am Colonel Carlyle."

Bonibel opened her eyes with a start, and looked at him, instantly recalling the gossip of her maid, Lucy. So this was Colonel Carlyle, Felise Herbert's elderly lover. She gave him a quick, curious glance.

He was an old man, certainly, and apparently made no attempt to disguise the fact, for the curling locks that still clustered abundantly on his head were silvered by time, as well as the long beard that flowed down upon his breast.

His features were aristocratic in contour, his mouth rather stern, his eyes still dark and piercing, though he could not have been less than seventy years old. He was dressed with taste and elegance, and his stately form was quite erect and stately.

"Yes, I have heard of you, Colonel Carlyle," Bonibel answered, quietly, "but I cannot imagine how you could know who I am. We have never met before."

"No," he answered, with a gallant bow and smile, "we have not. I have never had the happiness of meeting you, though I have frequently visited at your home. But the fame of Miss Vere's beauty has gone forth into the land, and when you named your address I knew you could be no other."

"I hope not," she echoed, growing paler and paler, and biting her lips to repress the moan of pain that trembled on them. She was really suffering acute pain from the twisted ankle.

He was silent a minute, studying the beautiful, pale face with admiring eyes. She looked up and met a world of deep sympathy shining on her from his keen, dark eyes.

"I was very fortunate in meeting you, Colonel Carlyle," she said, gently. "Believe me, I am much indebted for your timely aid."

"I am glad to have been of service to your father's daughter," said the colonel, bowing. "I knew your father intimately in the army, Miss Vere. We were friends though the general was my junior in age and my superior in rank. I have often wondered what poor Harry's daughter was like. He was so frank, so handsome, so chivalrous, so daring."

The girl's blue eyes lit up with pleasure at his praise of the father who had died in her infancy, but whose memory she loved and revered. She put out her hand, saying proudly:

"I thank you for your praise of him, Colonel Carlyle. Let my father's friend be mine also."

And the wealthy colonel gave the little hand a fervent pressure, feeling that those timely words of his had gained him a great advantage—one of which he would not be slow to avail himself.

He was about to express his pride and satisfaction at her words in glowing terms when, with a faint cry, she sank back against the cushions and closed her eyes. She had succumbed to her pain in spite of herself and fainted.

Fortunately they were within a block of the house. The colonel seated himself beside her and supported her helpless head on his arm until the carriage stopped in front of Mrs. Arnold's splendid brownstone mansion. Then he carefully lifted the fair burden in his arms and carried her across the pavement and up the steps, where he rang the bell.

The obsequious servant who opened the door to him stared in surprise and alarm at his burden, but silently threw open the drawing-room door, where Felise and her mother sat in company with a few visitors.

Both sprang up in bewilderment as Colonel Carlyle entered with a bow and laid the insensible Bonibel down upon the sofa. She looked like one dead as she lay there with her closed eyes and deathly-white face, and limp hands hanging down helplessly.

"What has happened, Colonel Carlyle?" demanded Felise, stepping forward, as he bent over Bonibel, while her mother and the guests echoed her words: "What has happened?"

"Miss Vere slipped and fell upon the ice," he answered, "and has sustained some serious injury. She has suffered much pain. Let her have medical attendance at once."

"But you," said Felise, abruptly, and almost rudely. "How came you with her?"

Colonel Carlyle looked at her in slight surprise.

"I was about crossing the pavement to enter my carriage," he explained, rather coolly, "when the accident occurred, and I had the happiness to be of service in bringing her home."

And Felise, as she watched him bending anxiously over the girl she hated, wished in her heart that Bonibel Vere might never recover from the swoon that looked so much like death.

CHAPTER X.

"A merry Christmas, Bonibel, and many happy returns of the day," Bonibel Vere, lying helplessly on the sofa in her dressing-room, looked up with a start of surprise.

Felise Herbert was entering with her cat-like steps and a deceitful smile wreathing her thin lips.

"Thank you, Felise," she answered wearily, "though your wishes can scarcely bear fruit to-day."

"Are you suffering so much pain to-day?" asked Felise, dropping into an easy-chair and resting her head with its crown of dark braids against its violet velvet lining.

"My ankle is rather painful."

"We are going to have a few friends to dine with us to-day—Colonel Carlyle is among them—and we thought—mother and I—that you might be well enough to come down into the drawing-room," said the visitor, watching the invalid keenly under her drooping lashes.

But the feverish flush on the girl's cheek did not deepen under the jealous scrutiny of the watcher. She watched with a sigh of positive relief.

"Many thanks, but it is not possible for me to do so, Felise; Doctor Graham said that I must remain closely confined to my sofa at least two weeks. And indeed I could not leave it if I tried. My foot is much swollen and I cannot stand at all."

She pushed out the little member from under the skirt of her warm white wrapper, and Felise saw that she spoke truly. She rose and came nearer under pretense of examining it.

"Why, what a pretty little ring you wear—is it a new one?" said she suddenly, and in an instant she had dexterously slipped it off Bonibel's finger, and, holding it up, read the inscription within,

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"Mizpah!" "Why, how romantic! Is it a love token, Bonibel?"

Bonibel's lips were quivering like a grieving child's, and quick tears sprang into her eyes.

"Felise," she said, reproachfully, "you should not have taken it off. I never meant for that ring to leave my finger while I lived, never!"

Felise laughed—a low, sneering laugh—and tossed her jetty braids.

"Here, take your ring," she said scornfully; "I did not know you were going to be such a baby over it. It must have been the gift of a lover to be so highly prized—perhaps it was given you by Leslie Dane."

Bonibel slipped the ring back on her tapering third finger, while a hot flush mounted to her brow.

"You seem very curious over my ring, Felise," she said, angrily. "I do not suppose it can matter to you at all who the giver may be."

"Oh! not in the least," said Felise, airily. "I beg your pardon for teasing you about it. But if someone should give me a prettier ring than that soon I should not mind telling you the donor. And by the way," said she, walking to the window and peering out through the lace curtains, "you must tell me, Bonibel, how you liked Colonel Carlyle the other day."

"I should be very ungrateful if I did not like him very well," said the girl, simply. "He was very good to me."

"That is an evasive answer," said Felise, laughing. "Should you have liked him if you had not been prompted thereto by gratitude?"

"I am sure I do not know. I was suffering such acute pain I hardly thought of him until he told me he had been an intimate friend of my papa while in the army. And he praised papa so highly I could not choose but like him for his words."

"The cunning old fox," said Felise to herself, while she drew her black brows angrily together. "Already he has been trying to find the way to her heart."

"He is rather fine-looking for one who is certainly no longer young—don't you think so, Bonibel?" pursued the wily girl.

"Certainly," said Bonibel, willing to praise Colonel Carlyle because she thought it would please Felise; "he does not seem so very old, and he is quite handsome and stately-looking."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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