

Old Man's Darling.

BY MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER,

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CHAPTER VII—Continued.

She did not comprehend the extent of the calamity that had fallen upon her. Her sorrow was too fresh for her mind to dwell upon the possibilities of the future that lay darkly before her.

"You have absolutely nothing," repeated Mrs. Arnold, grimly. "Your father left you nothing but fame; your uncle left you nothing but love. You will find it difficult to live upon either."

Bonnibel stared at her blankly. "You are utterly penniless," Mrs. Arnold repeated, coarsely.

"Then what am I to do?" asked the girl, gravely, twisting her little white hands uneasily together.

"What do you suppose?" the lady inquired, with a significant glance.

A scarlet banner fluttered into the white cheeks of the lovely invalid. The tone and glance of the coarse woman wounded her pride deeply.

"You will want me to go away from here, I suppose," she answered, quietly.

Mrs. Arnold straightened herself in her chair, and to Bonnibel's surprise assumed an air of wounded feeling.

"There, now, Bonnibel," said she, in a tone of reproach, "that is just like you. I never expected that you, spoiled child as you are, would ever do me justice; but do you think I could be so unfeeling as to cast you, a poor orphan child, out upon the cold charity of the world?"

Bonnibel's guileless little heart was deceived by this dramatic exhibition of fine feeling. She began to think she had done her uncle's wife injustice.

"Forgive me, aunt," she answered, gently. "I did not know what your feelings would be upon the subject. I know my uncle intended to provide for me."

"But since he signally failed to do so I will see that you do not suffer," said the widow, loftily; "of course, I am not legally compelled to do so, but I will keep you with me and care for you the same as I do for my own daughter, until you marry, which, I trust, will not be long after you lay aside your mourning. A girl as pretty as you, even without fortune, ought to make an early and advantageous settlement in life."

The whiteness of the girl's fair, childish face was again suffused with deep crimson.

"I shall never marry," she answered, sadly, thinking of the lover-husband who had left her months ago, and from whose silence she felt that he must be dead; "never, never!"

"Pshaw!" said Mrs. Arnold, impatiently; "all the girls talk that way, but they marry all the same. I should be sorry to have to take care of you all your life. I expect you and Felise to marry when a suitable party presents himself. My daughter already has an admirer in New York whom she would do well to accept. He is very old, but then he is a millionaire."

She arose, stately, handsome and dignified.

"Felise and I return to New York Saturday," she said. "Will you be strong enough to accompany us?"

"I am afraid not," said Bonnibel, faintly.

"Very well. Your maid and the house-keeper will take care of you in our absence. I will send you a traveling suit of mourning, and when you feel strong enough you can come to us."

"Yes, madam," Bonnibel answered, and the wealthy widow left the room.

So in a few weeks after, while nature was putting off her gay livery and donning winter hues, Bonnibel laid aside the bright garments she had been wont to wear, as she had already laid aside the joy and gladness of her brief spring of youth, and donning the black robes of bereavement and bitterness,

"Took up the cross of her life again," saying only it might have been.

The day before she left Sea View she went down to the shore to have a parting row in her pretty little namesake, the *Bonnibel*.

She had delayed her return to the city as long as possible, but now she was growing stronger she felt that she had no further excuse to dally in the home she loved so well, and which was so inseparably connected with the two beloved ones so sadly lost—the uncle who had gone away from her through the gates of death, and the young husband who seemed separated from her just as fatally by time and distance.

As she walked slowly down to the shore in the beautiful autumnal sunshine it seemed to her they both were dead. No message came to her from that far Italy, which was the beloved Mecca of Leslie's hopes and aspirations. He had never reached there, she told herself. Perhaps shipwreck and disaster had befell him on the way.

No thought of his forgetfulness or falsity crossed the mind of the loyal little

bride. It seemed to her that death was the only thing that could have thrown that strange gulf of silence between their hearts.

She sprang into the little skiff—one of her uncle's loving gifts to his niece—and suffered it to drift out into the blue waves. A fresh breeze was blowing and the water was rather rough. The breeze blew the soft, short rings of gold merrily about her white temples where the blue veins were seen wandering beneath the transparent skin.

The last time she had been out rowing her hair had floated like a banner of gold on the breeze, and her cheek had glowed crimson as the sunny side of a peach.

Now the shorn locks and the marble pallor of her cheeks told a different story. Love and beauty had both left her, she thought, mournfully. Yet nature was as lovely as ever, the blue sky was mirrored as radiantly in the blue sea, the sunshine still shone brightly, the breeze still whispered as tenderly to its sweethearts, the flowers. She alone was sad.

She stayed out a long while. It was so sunny and warm it seemed like a summer instead of an autumn day. The sea-gulls sported joyously above the surface of the water, now and then a silvery fish leaped up in the sunshine, its scales shining in beautiful rainbow hues, and shedding the crystal drops of spray from its body like a shower of diamonds, and the curlew's call echoed over the sea. How she had loved these things in the gay and careless girlhood that began to seem so far away in the past.

"That was Bonnibel Vere," she said to herself, "the girl that never knew a sorrow. I am Bonnibel Dane, whose life must lie forever in the shadow!"

She turned her course homeward, and as she stepped upon the shore she picked out a little blue sea-flower that grew in a crevice of the rock, and stood still a moment looking out over the blue expanse of ocean, and repeating some pretty lines she had always loved:

"'Tis sweet to sit midst a merry throng
In the woods, and hear the wild-bird's song;
But sweeter far is the ceaseless dirge,
The music low of the moaning surge;
It frets and foams on the shell-strewn shore,
Forever and ever, and evermore.
I crave no flower from the wood or field,
No rare exotic that hot-beds yield;
Give me the weeds that wildly cling,
On the barren rocks their shelter fling;
Those are the flowers beloved by me—
They grow in the depths of the deep blue sea!"

A sudden voice and step broke on her fancied solitude. She turned quickly and found herself face to face with the wandering sibil, Wild Madge. The half-crazed creature was, as usual, bare-headed, her white locks streaming in the air, her frayed and tattered finery waving fantastically about her lean, lithe figure. She looked at Bonnibel with a hideous leer of triumph.

"Ah maiden!" she cried—"said I not truly that the bitter waters of sorrow were about to flow over you? You will not mock the old woman's predictions now?"

Bonnibel stood silent, gazing in terrified silence at the croaking old raven.

"Where is the gay young lover now?" cried Wild Madge, laughing wildly. "The summer lover who wept away before the summer waned? Is he false, or is he dead, maiden, that he is not here to shelter that bonny head from the storms of sorrow?"

"Peace, woman," said Bonnibel, sadly.

"Why do you intrude on my grief with your unwelcome presence?"

"Unwelcome, is it, my bonny bird? Ah, well! 'tis but a thankless task to foretell the future to the young and thoughtless. But, Bonnibel Vere, you will remember me, even though it be but to hate me. I tell you your sorrows are but begun. New perils environ your future. Think not that mine is but a boasted art. Those things which are hidden from you lie open to the gaze of Wild Madge like a painted page. She can read your hands; she can read the stars; she can read the open face of nature!"

"You rave, poor creature," said Bonnibel, turning away with a shiver of unreasoning terror, and pursuing her homeward way.

Wild Madge stood still on the shore a few minutes, looking after the girl as her slim, black-robed figure walked away with the slow step of weakness and weariness.

"It is a bonny maid," she said, aloud; "a bonny maid. Beautiful as an angel, gentle as a dove. But beauty is a gift of the gods, and seldom given for aught but sorrow."

CHAPTER VIII.

When Bonnibel arrived in New York the day after her rencontre with the sibil, she found her uncle's fine carriage in waiting for her at the depot. Mrs. Arnold,

though she would gladly have cast the girl off, was too much afraid of the world's dictum to carry her wishes into effect. She determined, therefore, that society should have no cause to accuse her of failing in kindness to her husband's orphan niece. She knew well what disapprobation and censure a contrary course would have created, for the beautiful daughter of the famous General Vere, though she had not yet been formally introduced to society, was widely celebrated for her grace and beauty, and her *debut*, while she had been considered her uncle's heiress, had been anticipated with much interest. Of course her penniless condition now would make a great difference in the eyes of the fickle world of fashion but still Mrs. Arnold knew that nothing could deprive Bonnibel of the prestige of birth and rank. The young mother who had died in giving her birth, had been one of the proud and well-born Arnolds. Her father, a gay and gallant soldier, though he had quickly dissipated her mother's fortune, had yet left her a prouder heritage than wealth—a fame that would live forever in the annals of his country, perpetuating in history the name of the chivalrous soldier who had gallantly fallen at the head of his command while engaged in one of the most gallant actions on record.

So Bonnibel found a welcome, albeit a chilling one, waiting for her in Mrs. Arnold's grand drawing-room when she arrived there cold and weary. The mother and daughter touched her fingers carelessly, and offered frigid congratulations upon her recovery. Mrs. Arnold then dismissed her to her own apartments to rest and refresh her toilet under the care of her maid.

"You need not be jealous of her youth and beauty any more, Felise," said Mrs. Arnold complacently to her daughter. "She has changed almost beyond recognition. Did you ever see such a fright?"

Felise Herbert, hovering over the bright fire that burned on the marble hearth, looked up angrily.

"Mother, you talk like a fool," she said, roughly. "How can you fail to see that she is more beautiful than ever? She only looked like a great wax doll before with her pink cheeks and long curls. Now with that new expression that has come into her face she looks like a haunting picture. One could not forget such a face. And mourning is perfectly becoming to her blonde complexion, while my olive skin is rendered perfectly hideous by it. I see no reason why I should spoil my looks by wearing black for a man that was no relation of mine, and whom I cordially hated!"

Mrs. Arnold saw that Felise was in a passion, and she began to grow nervous accordingly. Felise, if that were possible, was a worse woman than her mother, and possessed an iron will. She was the power behind the throne before whom Mrs. Arnold trembled in fear and bowed in adoration.

She hastened to console the angry girl. "I think you are mistaken, my dear," she said. "I cannot see a vestige of prettiness left. Her hair is gone, her color has faded, and she never smiles now to show the dimples that people used to call so distracting. There are few that would give her a second glance. Besides, what is beauty without wealth? You know in our world it simply counts for nothing. She can never rival you a second now that it is known that she has no money and that you will be my heiress."

The sullen countenance of Felise began to grow brighter at the latter consolatory clause.

"As to the black," pursued Mrs. Arnold, "of course you and I know that it is a mere sham; but then, Felise, it is necessary to make that much concession to the opinion of the world. How they would cavil if you failed in that mark of respect to the memory of your step-father."

"There is one consolation," said Felise, brightening up, "I can lay it aside within a year."

"And then, no doubt, you will don the bridal robe as the wife of the millionaire, Colonel Carlyle," Mrs. Arnold rejoined, with an air of great satisfaction.

"Perhaps so," said her daughter, clouding over again; "but you need not be so sure. He has not proposed yet."

"But he will soon," asserted the widow, confidently.

"I expected he would do so until now," said Felise, sharply. "The old dotard appeared to admire me very much; but since Bonnibel Vere has returned to flaunt her baby-beauty before him, his fickle fancy may turn to her. A pretty face can make a fool of an old man, you know."

"We must keep her in the background, then," said Mrs. Arnold, reassuringly. "Not that I am the least apprehensive of danger, my dear, but since your fears take that direction he shall not see her until all is secure, and you must bring him to the point as soon as possible."

"I have done my best," said Felise, "but he hovers on the brink apparently afraid to take the leap. I cannot understand such dawdling on the part of one who has already buried two wives. He cannot be afflicted with timidity."

"We must give him a hint that I shall settle fifty thousand dollars on you the day you marry," said her mother. "I have heard that he is very avaricious. It is a common vice of age and infirmity. He fears you will spend his wealth too freely."

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"And so I will, if I get a chance" said Felise, coarsely. "I have been stunted all my life by the stepfather who hated me. Let me but become Mrs. Colonel Carlyle, and I assure you I will queen it right royally."

"You would become the position very much," said the admiring mother, "and I should be very proud of my daughter's graceful ease in spending her husband's millions."

Miss Herbert's proud lips curled in triumph. She arose and began to pace the floor restlessly, her eyes shining with pleased anticipation of the day which she hoped was not far distant when she would marry the rich man whose wealth she coveted, and become a queen in society. She looked around her at the splendor and elegance of her mother's drawing-room with dissatisfaction, and resolved that her own should be far more fine and costly, her attire more extravagant, and her diamonds more splendid. She was tired of reigning with her mother. She wanted to rule over a kingdom of her own.

Felise had no more heart than a stone. Her only god was wealth, and her ambition was towering. She thought only of self, and felt not the first emotion of gratitude to the mother who had schemed and planned for her all her life. All she desired was unbounded wealth and the power to rule in her own right.

"Miss Felise has caught a beau at last," said Bonnibel's maid to her as she brushed the soft locks of her mistress. She had been having a hasty chat with Miss Herbert's maid since her arrival that day, and had gathered a good deal of gossip in the servant's hall.

"Indeed?" asked Bonnibel, languidly, "what is his name, Lucy?"

"He is a Colonel Carlyle, Miss; a very old man Janet do say, but worth his millions. He have buried his two wives already, I hear, and Miss Herbert is like to be a third one. I wish him joy of her; Janet knows what her temper is."

"You need not speak so, Lucy," said Bonnibel, reprovingly, to the maid whose loquacity was far ahead of her grammar.

"I daresay Janet gives her cause to indulge in temper sometimes."

"Lor! Miss Bonnibel," said Lucy, "Janet is as mild as a dove; but Miss Felise, she have slapped Janet's mouth twice, and scolded her day in and day out. Janet says that Colonel Carlyle will catch a Tartar when he gets her."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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ESTABLISHED 1889.

The Review,

RICHIBUCTO, NEW BRUNSWICK.

Published every Thursday at \$1.00 per year in advance; \$1.50 if not paid within three months.

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