

# Old Man's Darling.

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

## CHAPTER I.

"The sea, the sea, the open sea;  
The blue, the fresh, the ever free,"  
chanted the fresh and delicious voice of a young girl walking along the sands of the seashore in the summer sunshine at Cape May.

"Cross my palm with silver, and I'll tell your fortune, bonnie maid," said a cracked, discordant voice.

The singer paused abruptly and looked at the owner of the voice, a lean, decrepit old hag, who extended her withered hand imploringly.

"Nay, now, good soul," answered she, with a merry laugh, "fortune will come to me anyway, even if I keep my silver piece."

"Aye—aye, it will," said the old crone, wagging her head like a bird of evil omen, "it aye comes to faces as bonny as your own. But it's I that can tell you whether it be good or ill fortune."

"Here, then," said the girl, still laughing, and putting a silver piece into the trembling old hand; "be cheerful, now, and tell me a brave fortune for my money."

The old sybil did not appear to relish the light and jesting tone of the other, and stood for a moment gazing at her in grave and portentous silence.

What a contrast the two presented as they stood looking at each other!

The girl was beautiful, with all the delicate freshness and slimmness of eighteen. She was a dazzling blonde with sea-blue eyes, and hair like spun gold falling beneath her jaunty sailor hat in long, loose curls to her graceful waist. She was fair as a lily, with a flush like the heart of a sea-shell on her round, dimpled cheeks. Her brow was fair and broad, and fringed with soft, childish rings of sunny hair. Her nose was small and straight; her mouth was curved like Cupid's bow, its short, exquisite upper lip lending a touch of archness to the patrician mold of her features. The small, delicately shaped hands and feet were in keeping with the rare beauty of her face and form. She was simply clad in a jaunty sailor costume of dark blue serge trimmed with white braid and pearl buttons, and carried a volume of poems in her gloved hand.

As contrasted with this peerless beauty and youthful grace the old sybil appeared hideous as a fiend beside an angel.

She was diminutive in stature, and bent nearly double with the weight of years. Her scanty, streaming white hair was in odd contrast with the dark, parchment-like skin and jet-black eyes that sparkled with a keen and unnatural brightness. A wicked, malevolent expression was the prevailing cast of her wrinkled features, and her cheeks and lips having fallen in upon her toothless gums, converted her grim smile into a most Satanic grin. The dreadful old beldam was attired in a *melange* of ancient and faded finery, consisting of a frayed and dirty quilted satin petticoat and an overdress of rich brocade whose original brilliant oriental hues were almost obliterated by time and ill-usage. She gathered these faded relics about her with a certain air of pride as she said to the young girl:

"Sit ye down upon the stone there, and let me look at your palm."

She was obeyed with a demure smile by the listener, who drew off her glove and presented the loveliest hand in the world for inspection—a lily-white hand, small and dimpled, and tapering, with rosy palm and tips—a perfect hand that might have been enclosed in a glass case and looked at only as a "thing of beauty."

The sybil took that dainty bit of flesh and blood into her brown, wrinkled claws and scanned it intently.

"You are well-born," she said, slowly. "You can tell that much by the shape of my nose, I suppose," laughed the girl, mischievously.

The old hag glanced at the elegant, aristocratic little member in question and frowned.

"I can tell by your hand," said she, shortly. "Not but that it is written on your features a'—so—for you are very beautiful."

"Others have told me so before," said the girl, with her musical, light-hearted laugh.

"Peace, will-o'-the-wisp!" said the old woman, sternly. "Do not pride yourself upon that fatal gift! You are lovely as an angel, but your beauty will be your bane."

"But beauty wins love," cried the listener, artlessly, while a rosy blush stained her fair brow and cheeks.

"Aye, aye, it wins love," was the crusty answer. "Your life will have enough of love, be sure. But beauty wins hate, too. The love that is lavished on you will be shadowed and darkened by the hate your fair face will inspire. Do not think you will be happy because you are beautiful. Years of wretchedness lie before you!"

"Oh! no," said the girl, with an invol-

untary shiver.

"It is true," said the sybil, peering into the hand that she held. "If you could read this little pink palm as I do, you would go wild with the horror of it. The line of life is crossed with sorrows. Sorrow and shame lie darkly over your future."

"Not shame," said the young girl, cresting her small head with a queenly gesture of pride. "Sorrow, perhaps; but never shame!"

"It is written," answered the old woman, sharply. "Do you think to alter the decrees of fate with your idle words, proud girl? No, no; there will be a stain on the whiteness of your life that your tears can never wash out. Love and hate will brand it there. You will be a young man's bride, but an old man's darling."

She paused, and a faint smile dimpled the young girl's cheek. Apparently the latter prediction did not seem to overwhelm her as the witch expected.

"I have been an old man's darling all my life," she said gently. "I assure you it is very pleasant."

"Girl, I meant not the tie of consanguinity," cried the sybil, sharply. "You do not understand. Ah! you will know soon enough; for I tell you, girl, a cloud is gathering over your head; gathering swiftly to burst over you in a tempest of fury. Fly! Fly! Go and cast yourself into those raging Atlantic waves yonder, rather than breast the torrent of sorrow about to break upon your life!"

Her voice had risen almost to a pitch of fury with the last words, and her eyes flashed as with the light of inspiration. She cast a strange look upon the trembling girl, and, dropping her hand abruptly, turned away, hobbling out of sight with a rapidity that scarcely seemed possible in one so stricken with age.

The young girl, who a moment ago had seemed so blithe and *debonair*, sat still a few moments where the sybil had left her, looking curiously into the pink palm from which such dire prophecies had been read. She looked like one dazed, and a slight pallor had momentarily usurped the rose tint on her cheek.

"How earnestly the old creature talked," she murmured, musingly, "as if that horrid jargon of hers could be true. What is there in my hand but a few lines that mean nothing? She saw that I did not believe in her art, and predicted those dreadful things merely to punish me for my doubt. Heigho! I have never had a sorrow in my life and never expect to have one."

She drew on her glove, and taking up her volume of poems, pursued her way along the shore, looking a little more thoughtful than when she had tripped that way a little while before singing in the lightness of her heart.

After walking a short distance she paused, and selecting a shady seat, sat down where she could watch the blue waves of the ocean rolling in, crestled with snowy foam, and the wild flight of the sea-birds wheeling in the sunny air, and darting down now and then for some object of prey their keen eyes discerned in the water. After watching these objects for awhile she grew weary, and, opening her book, began to read fitfully, turning the pages at random, as if only half her heart was in the task.

She had been reading perhaps half an hour when the light dip of oars in the water saluted her ears. She looked up quickly and saw a fairy little skiff with one occupant coming around a curve of the shore toward her. The skiff was very dainty, with trimly cushioned seats. It was painted in shining blue and white, and bore around about the prow in letters of blue and gold, the fanciful name, "Bonnie." The single occupant, a young man singularly handsome and resolute-looking, called out as he neared the shore:

"I have borrowed your skiff very unceremoniously, Miss Vere; but since I have been detected in the theft, may I not persuade you to leave your lonely eyrie there, and accompany me in my little pleasure-trip this evening?"

## CHAPTER II.

Bonnie Vere closed her book and sprang up with a blush and smile of pleasure.

"Of course you know that I cannot refuse the invitation," said she, brightly. "I am just dying to talk to some one."

"Woman like!" answered Leslie Dane, laughing, as he assisted her to a seat.

"I suppose you never find your high majesty in a like predicament," said she, rather pettily, as the skiff swept out into the blue, encircling waves.

He smiled at the childish air of offended dignity she assumed.

"*Au contraire*," he answered, gaily, "it was only this evening that I was experiencing a like feeling. For instance, when I captured your skiff and set forth alone I was just dying to have you along with

me to talk to. And now I have my wish and you have yours. We are very fortunate!"

"Do you think so?" she inquired, carelessly. "If gratified wishes make one fortunate, then I have been fortunate all my life. Uncle Francis has never refused to indulge me in anything I ever set my heart upon."

"He has been very kind, then, and you ought to be a very happy girl," he answered; "yet you were looking rather grave and thoughtful this evening as I came around the curve. Was your book so very interesting?"

"It failed to awaken an interest in me," she answered, simply, "for I was thinking of other things."

"Of weighty and momentous matters, no doubt," he commented.

"Perhaps so," she answered. "Come now, Mr. Dane, guess what I have been doing this evening."

"It would be a hard task to follow the movements of so erratic a star as Miss Bonibel Vere," he said in a light tone of rally, yet looking at her with all his manly heart in his large, dreamy, dark eyes. "Do not keep me in suspense, fair lady, this sultry evening. Confess."

She looked up, and, meeting his ardent glance, dropped her eyes until the long, curling lashes hid them from view. A scarlet banner fluttered into her cheeks like a danger signal.

"I have been getting my fortune told—there!" said she, laughing.

"Whew!" said Mr. Dane in profound surprise. "Getting your fortune told! And by whom, may I ask?"

"Oh, by a horrid old crone who stepped into my path on my way here and demanded a piece of silver and wished to foretell my future. Of course, I do not believe in such things at all, but I humored the poor old soul just for fun, you know, and a dreadful prediction she gave me for my money."

"Let me hear it," said Leslie Dane, smiling.

Bonibel recounted the words and gestures of the old sybil with patient exactness and inimitable mimicry to her interested listener.

"It was Wild Madge, no doubt," said he, when she had finished. "I have seen her several times on the shore, and I made quite an effective picture of her once, though I dare say the old witch would want to murder me if she knew it. The gossips hereabouts assert that she can read the future very truly."

"You do not believe it—do you?" asked she, looking up with a gleam of something like dread in her beautiful blue orbs.

"Believe it—of course not," said he, contemptuously. "There were but two things she told you that I place any faith in."

"What are they?" she questioned, anxiously.

"I believe you will be an old man's darling, for I know you are that already. Your Uncle Francis loves the very ground you walk upon, to use a homely expression, and, Bonibel," he paused, his voice lingering over the sound of her name with inexpressible tenderness.

"Well?" she said, looking up with an innocent inquiry in her eyes.

"And, Bonibel—forgive my daring, little one—I believe you will be a young man's bride if you will let me make you such."

They were spoken—words that had been trembling on his lips all these summer months, in which Bonibel Vere had grown dearer to him than his own life—the words that would seal his fate! He looked at her imploringly, but her face was turned away, and she was trailing one white unglowed hand idly through the blue water.

"Perhaps I am presumptuous in speaking such words to you, little one," he continued, gently. "I am but a poor artist, with fame and fortune yet to win, and the world says that you will be your uncle's heiress. Yet I have dared to love you, Bonibel—who could see you and not love you? Are you very angry with me, darling?"

Still no answer from the silent girl before him. She kept her sweet face turned away from his gaze, and continued to play with the water as though indifferent to his words. He went on patiently, his full manly voice freighted with deep emotion: "I am as proud as you in my way. Bonibel, I do not ask to claim you now in my struggle with the world. I only ask you to remember me, and that when fame and fortune are both conquered, I may return to lay them at your feet."

He paused and waited, thinking that she must be very angry indeed to avert her face so resolutely; but suddenly, with a ripple of silvery laughter, she turned and looked at him.

Oh! the beauty of that face she turned upon him! It was fairly transfigured with love and happiness. It was bathed in brilliant blushes, tinted like the sunset red that was flushing the evening sky. A quivering smile played around her delicate lips, and two vivid stars of light burned in the blue depths of her eyes.

"Bonibel," he cried, rapturously, "you are not angry; you forgive me—you will let me worship you, and you will love me a little in return!"

"You are very presumptuous, Mr. Dane," said she, trying to frown away the smiles that danced around her lips.

"Do not play with me, Bonibel," he said, earnestly. "You are too young and

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innocent to play the coquette. Lay your little hand in mine, dearest, and promise that one day, though it may be years hence, you will be my wife."

He dropped the oars, and suffered the fairy bark to drift at its own sweet will, while he reached his hand to hers. She hesitated one moment between girlish shyness and a mischievous love of teasing, but a swift look at the dark, eloquent face of her handsome lover conquered her. She laid her beautiful hand in his slender fingers, and murmured, in a tone of passionate tenderness:

"Leslie, the greatest happiness the world holds for me is to be your wife!"

Leslie Dane's dark eyes grew radiant with joy and pride.

"My darling, my queen," he murmured. "A thousand thanks for that assurance! How can I thank you enough for giving me so much happiness?"

"You have made me very happy, too, Leslie," said the girl, simply.

"But what will your uncle say to us, do you think, Bonibel?" said he, presently. "Will he not be angry with the portionless artist who dares to sue for this fairy hand?"

"Oh! no," she said, innocently. "He has never denied me anything in his life. He will consent when he knows how much I love you. You must ask him this very evening to let us be engaged while you are away winning fame and fortune. He will not be angry."

"I hope not," said the less sanguine lover. "But the sun is setting, darling. We must return."

In the beautiful summer evening they rowed back through the blue waves, with the curlews calling above their heads, and the radiant sunset shining on the water with a brightness that seemed typical of the future which lay before their young and loving hearts.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

## Blacksmith's Statement

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