

Old Man's Darling.

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

CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

"Felise, do you sleep well at night?" she inquires, abruptly.

"Why should I not?" the girl asks, turning her head away.

"I do not know; but there is a haggardness and restlessness about you as if you didn't sleep much. I fancy you are getting nervous and wakeful brooding over this revenge of yours. Your face has grown wan and your eyes quite wild. Take care of yourself or you will lose your beauty."

"Never mind, mother; when we go to Paris next year I will go to one of those wonderful women there and have myself made beautiful forever."

"To Paris? Do you really mean it, Felise? I thought you said the last time we went abroad that you were tired of it and never meant to go again."

"I have changed my mind, mother. That is the privilege of the fair sex, you know."

"I suppose you have some motive in this change of mind, Felise."

"Yes, I have. I want to be on hand when Mrs. Carlyle comes forth from her finishing school. I have a fancy to see her after the polishing process is completed."

She laughs softly to herself as if something pleasant has occurred to her.

"Well, well, have your own way about it, my dear—you always do. But I wish you could forget the Carlyles and enjoy life better. We have everything to make it enjoyable, and if you wanted to marry, why you could buy almost anyone you wanted with our wealth."

"I could not buy Colonel Carlyle, mother, though I wanted him very much. He is the wealthiest man I know of anywhere."

"You do not need to marry for wealth, my daughter; we have enough of our own."

Felise did not answer. She was absorbed in thought. Nothing Mrs. Arnold could say made the least impression on her mind.

She was wedded to one idea, and as the weeks and months rolled by it only took a firmer hold on her feelings.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Madam Carlyle, monsieur, your husband, awaits you in the *salon*."

The tall, beautiful blonde, practicing a difficult sonata at the piano, pauses a moment and suffers her white hands to rest idly on the keys.

"Colonel Carlyle, did you say, madam?" she inquires, calmly.

The dignified head of the Parisian school bows in assent, and stands awaiting her pupil's pleasure. The latter rises slowly, folds her music together, restores it to the proper place and turns to leave the music-room.

"You will wish to make some change in your dress, of course," the lady superior blandly asserts.

Madam Carlyle gives a glance downward at her dress of dark blue cashmere. It is made with almost nun-like simplicity, and fits her rounded, graceful form to perfection. The neck and sleeves are finished with frills and fine lace, and there is not an ornament about her except the rings on her tapering fingers. She does not need ornament. She is rarely, peerlessly beautiful with her fair flower-face and luxuriant crown of golden hair.

"It is not necessary," she answers. "Colonel Carlyle is perhaps impatient."

There is a delicate-veiled sarcasm in the words barely perceptible to the trained hearing of the listener. With that simple speech she turns and glides from the room, leaving the lady superior gazing after her in some surprise.

"They say that we in France make *marriages de convenance*," she murmurs in French (which we will spare our readers); "but surely the Americans must do likewise. That old man and that fair young girl—surely it is the union of winter and summer. After two years' absence she goes to him as coolly as an iceberg."

Meanwhile Mrs. Carlyle has glided down the long hall, opened the door of the reception room with a steady hand, and stepped across the threshold.

"Bonnie!" exclaims a voice, trembling with rapture and emotion—"my darling wife!"

His arms are about her, his lips touch hers.

After a moment she gently disengages herself and looks up in his face.

"Colonel Carlyle," she exclaims involuntarily, "how changed you are!"

Ten years instead of two seem to have gone over his head.

A look of age and weakness has grown into his face, his erect form has acquired a perceptible stoop; yet a look of disappointment flashes into his eyes at her words.

"It is only the fatigue of travel," he

answers, quickly. "I have been a great wanderer since we parted, my dear, and the weariness of travel is still upon me. But as soon as I get rested and recuperated I shall look quite like myself again."

"I hope so," she answers, politely. "Pray resume your seat, sir."

He looks at her a little wistfully as she seats herself some distance from him.

"Bonnie, are you glad to see me again?" he asks, gently.

She looks up, startled, and hesitating what to say to this point-blank question.

He sees the struggle in a moment, and adds, quickly and a little sadly:

"Never mind, my dear, you need not answer. I see you have not forgotten my harshness in the past, and you are not prepared with an answer that would make me happy. But, my darling, you must learn forgetfulness of those things that alienated you from me, for I shall bend every effort now to the one object of making you happy. I have come to take you away with me, Bonnie."

A slight, almost imperceptible, shiver runs through her at the words, and she smoothes a faint sigh.

She will be very sorry to leave this haven of peace in which she has rested securely the last two years. She has grown fond of her quiet life among the "passionless, pale-cold" nuns of the convent, and is loth to break its repose by going back to the jar and fret of life with her jealous husband. She wishes that she might stay in the convent all her life.

"Do you intend to return at once to the United States, sir?" she inquires, being at a loss for something to say.

"Not yet, unless you particularly desire it. I want you to see something of life in the gay French capital—'dear, delightful Paris,' as we Americans call it. I have rented an elegant *chateau* and furnished it in handsome style, according to what I fancied your taste would prefer; have engaged a retinue of servants; and there is a lovely garden of roses; in short, the home is ready, and only awaits its mistress. I have tried to arrange everything as you would like it."

"Thank you; you are very kind," she murmurs, almost inaudibly.

"The next thing," he goes on, "is to take you to Worth, where you may order an outfit as handsome as a queen's, if you choose. And jewels—well, you shall have as many and as costly ones as you like."

"I have enough jewels, I think," she answers. "There are the pearls Uncle Francis gave me; then my wedding-gift—the diamonds."

"Tut, tut; you will need many more when you are fairly launched on the tide of gay society here. You will see women fairly loaded with jewels—you must not have less than they. Not but that you are beautiful enough to dispense with extraneous ornament, but I wish you to outshine all others in adornment as well as in beauty."

The long lashes droop over her cheeks a little sadly as he talks. So these are the things with which she is to fill her life—society, dress, jewels, fashion. A long life, too, perhaps, for she is barely twenty-one now. For other women there may be love and happiness—for her nothing but the gilded pleasures that wealth can purchase. Ah, well, and with a start she remembers Mrs. Arnold's threat and her weak subjugation by it—these are the things for which she sold herself to the old man sitting yonder. She made the bargain herself, and now she must abide by it. She is a fettered slave, but at least her bonds are golden ones.

"You are very kind," she answers, trying hard to be cordial and grateful for his generosity. "I do not know how to thank you for your munificence, sir."

"I will tell you," he answers, quickly. "Try to like me a little, Bonnie. Once I dreamed of winning your love; but things went wrong and I—I—perhaps I was too harsh with the bonny bird I had caught—so I came near earning your hatred instead. But that was so long ago. You will try to forgive me and like me just a little now, my wife."

The pathos of his words, his aged, weary looks touch a tender chord in her young heart, and thaw out a little of the icy crust of reserve that has been freezing around it these two years.

She rises impulsively and walks over to him, putting her delicate hand, warm with youth and health, into his cold, white, trembling one.

"Indeed, I will try," she says, earnestly. "Only be kind to me and do not frighten me with your jealous fancies, and I will like you very much indeed!"

He kisses the little hand with the ardor of a boyish lover, feeling his heart beat warm and youthful still at her gently-spoken words.

"A thousand thanks, my angel!" he exclaims. "Your words have made me very happy. I will try to curb my jealous temper and merit your sweet regard."

And now, my dearest, how soon can you, accompany me? I do not want to go away without you."

"You wish me to go at once—to-day?" she stammers, drawing back ever so slightly.

"To-day—at once," he answers. "I have wearied for a sight of you so long my wife, that I cannot let you go again. I want you to put on a carriage costume at once, and I will take you to Worth's, and from thence to the *chateau*."

"But my maid—and my trunks," she urges, in dismay.

"Tell your maid to pack your trunks and we will send for them this evening, and her also. By the way, who is your maid? Have you a competent one?" he inquires.

"You remember Lucy—the girl who came over with me from New York?" she says.

He frowns slightly.

"Ah, yes; but she will not suit you now dear. You must let her go, and secure a skillful French maid."

"Let Lucy go—the faithful creature!" For the first time her lip quivers. "Oh, no, I cannot part with Lucy. She has been my attendant ever since I was a child, and is the only link that is left to me out of my old life."

"Keep her with you still, then, but secure a French maid also, and let Lucy hold a sinecure."

"It would break her heart, Colonel Carlyle, to depose her from her post as my chief helper. Besides, though she is rather illiterate, the girl has real talent and taste in her vocation. Pray do not ask me to give her up."

"As you please, my dear. But now go and make your adieux to the lady superior and your friends here, and prepare to accompany me to your new home," said the colonel, with slight impatience, for he already felt his dominant passion, jealousy rising within him at Bonnie's openly-expressed preference for her maid. Old or young, male or female, he could not feel contented that anyone but himself should hold a place in his young wife's heart.

She went away and remained what seemed a long time to the impatient old man. She came back with slightly-flushed cheeks and a mist in her sea-blue eyes, attended by the superior of the convent.

With a brief and gentle farewell to her, Bonnie entered the carriage with her husband.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Hurrah, Leslie!"

"Well, Carl!"

"Our pictures are sold!"

"What pictures?"

"What pictures?" mimicking the indifferent tone. "Oh! how indifferent we are! yet a year ago how blessed were the feet of the messenger who brought such tidings! Success falls upon you, my boy. Now with me a ready sale is quite an event. Of course I meant the pictures we sent to Paris!"

The same old studio at Rome into which we looked three years ago and the same two artists we saw then. Carl Muller had just entered, waving an open letter over his head.

The gay, mercurial German looked as boyishly handsome as ever, as though time had forgotten him. Not so with Leslie Dane, who stood beside a half-finished picture, critically regarding it. He was handsomer than ever, as though the subtle hand of a sculptor had been at work upon his features chiseling the fine Greek outlines into rarer perfection and delicacy. A few lines of thought and care added rather than detracted from the interest with which one turned a second time to look at his face. The full lips half shaded by the dark mustache had lost a little of the almost womanly sweetness of the past and acquired a sterner curve. Into the dark eyes there had crept a gleam of brooding sadness, and a few silver threads shone in the clustering locks about his white brow. His last three years had made their mark upon him in many subtle changes.

"I could have told you that yesterday, Carl," he said, smiling, "but you were out when my letter came, and I was so busy over my picture here that I forgot it when you returned."

"The agent wrote to you first then," said Carl. "He might have had the courtesy to drop me a line at the same time."

"Do not blame him too much, Carl," said Leslie Dane. "He was in a hurry about writing to me because he had a letter to inclose from the purchaser of the pictures."

"Another commission, you lucky dog!" exclaimed Carl Muller.

"It amounts to that, I suppose. He wants me to go to Paris and paint his wife's portrait. If I will not go to Paris he will come to Rome."

"If the mountain will not go to Mahomet, then Mahomet must go to the mountain," said Carl.

"Something that way," said Leslie, carelessly.

"You will accept, of course. The old fellow paid such an extravagant price for the pictures that another commission might be a temptation even to you who have lately been surfeited with success."

"The money certainly might be an object, but I think I shall refuse," was the abrupt reply.

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"Refuse!" exclaimed Carl, in surprise, "and why, if I may ask?"

"The man is an American."

"So are you," cried the German, surprised at the dark frown that darkened on Leslie's brow. "Is that a disgrace?"

"I suppose not. Yet I will have nothing to do with my countrymen," said the artist, sternly.

Carl gave vent to a low whistle.

"Ye gods! An American—born under the shadow of the eagle's wing of liberty, a citizen of a land the most patriotic upon earth—coolly repudiating his country! I never expected to see such a novel sight under the sun!"

"You mistake me, Carl," said Leslie Dane, a little vexed. "I do not repudiate my native land. I revere her as the noblest country upon earth, but I am from henceforth an exile, self-ex-patriated from her shores, and I do not wish to meet anyone who can recall memories I would fain forget."

"You are a strange fellow, Leslie, I cannot understand your moods."

"You do not? Shall I explain, Carl? Listen, then."

Carl looked up into the dark face with its look of proud grief mingled with bitterness.

"No, no; forgive my levity," he said; "I would not intrude upon your secret, dear friend. Let it rest."

"It does not matter," said Leslie, his deep voice full of pain. "I will tell you, Carl. It is only this: One woman in that fair land where I was born has played me false and ruined my life. I hate and shun all Americans for her sake!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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