

# **AN OLD MAN'S DARLING.**

BY MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

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## 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 sibyl 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 slimness 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 sibyl 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 sibyl 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 also—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 involuntary shiver.

"It is true," said the sibyl, 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 sibyl, 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 sibyl 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, crested 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, "Bonnibel." 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.

Bonnibel 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 pettishly, 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 Bonnibel Vere," he said in a light tone of railery, 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.

Bonnibel recounted the words and gestures of the old sibyl 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, Bonnibel," 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, Bonnibel—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 Bonnibel 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 ungloved 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, Bonnibel—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. Bonnibel, 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 deeps of her eyes.

"Bonnibel," 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, Bonnibel," he said, earnestly. "You are too young and 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, Bonnibel?" 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.

At length they anchored their boat, and stepped upon the shore in full view of a large and handsome white villa that stood in the middle of beautiful and well-kept grounds. Toward this abode of wealth and pride they directed their footsteps.

"Uncle Francis is sitting out on the piazza," said Bonnibel, as they went up the smooth, graveled walk. "You must go right in and ask him, Leslie, while I run away up-stairs to dress for dinner."

"Very well, dear. And—stay, darling, if I should not be here when you come back, run down to the shore after the moon is up, and I will tell you what answer your uncle gives my suit."

"Very well; I will do so," she answered. "But I am sure that Uncle Francis will keep you to dinner, so I shall see you directly I come down."

He pressed her hand and she tripped across the piazza into the hall, and then ran up the broad stair-way to her room with a lighter heart than ever beat in her breast again.

Leslie Dane walked down the piazza to where Bonnibel's uncle and guardian, Francis Arnold, the millionaire, sat in his easy-chair puffing his evening cigar, and indolently watching the blue wreaths of smoke curling over his head.

Mr. Arnold was a spare, well-made man of sixty-five, with iron-gray hair and beard. His well-cut features were sharp and resolute in contour, and betokened more sternness than Bonnibel Vere ever dreamed of in his unflinching tenderness to herself. He was elegantly dressed, and wore a costly diamond ring on his little finger.

As the young man drew near, the stately millionaire arose and acknowledged his respectful greeting with considerable cordiality.

"Ah! Dane, good-evening. Have a seat and join me in a cigar."

"Thank you, I do not smoke," answered the young artist, politely, "but I am sorry to interrupt your enjoyment of that luxury."

"It does not matter," said the millionaire, tossing his own cigar away and resuming his seat. "Sit down, Dane. Well, how do you get on with your pictures?"

The dusky, handsome face lighted up with pleasure.

"Famously, thank you. I have sold two little pictures in New York lately at quite a fair valuation, and the critics have praised them. They say I have genius and should study under the best masters."

"Indeed! I congratulate you," said Mr. Arnold, cordially. "Do you think of taking their advice?"

"I do. I shall sail for Rome very soon now, and study there a year or two," said Leslie, his features beaming with pleasure. "I believe I shall succeed in my ambition. I feel within myself the promptings of genius, and I know that my persistent labor will conquer fame and fortune."

The elder man regarded him with some surprise. He had never seen him so enthusiastic on any subject before, even that of his beloved art.

"You seem very sanguine and determined," he observed with a smile.

"I *am* determined," answered Leslie, gravely. "I mean to *conquer* success. You remember the hackneyed quotation:

"In the proud lexicon of youth which fate reserves to a bright manhood,  
There is no such a word as Fail!"

"I did not know you had such a towering ambition, Dane," said the millionaire, with a smile.

"My ambition is no higher than my hopes, Mr. Arnold, for I have come here this evening to ask you for the hand of Miss Vere when I shall be in a position worthy of that high honor!"

"Sir!"

The word rolled out of the millionaire's mouth like a thunder-clap.

He straightened himself in his chair, seeming to grow several inches taller, and his iron-gray hair seemed to stand erect on his head with indignant surprise. His keen gray eyes regarded Leslie Dane with a stony stare of surprise, bordering on contempt.

"I have the sanction of your niece, Miss Vere, to ask of you her hand in marriage," repeated Leslie Dane, calmly.

Mr. Arnold sprang to his feet, furious with rage, pale as death under the influence of this overmastering emotion.

"Villain!" he cried out in loud, excited tones. "Do you mean to tell me that you have abused the confidence I reposed in your honor as a gentleman, to win the heart of that innocent, trusting child? You, a poor, penniless, unknown artist!"

"I grant you I am poor, Mr. Arnold," answered Leslie Dane, rising and confronting his accuser with a mien as proud as his own. "But that I have abused your confidence, I deny! Bonnibel loves me as I love her, but I have taken no undue advantage to gain her love. You invited me here,



and gave me every opportunity to cultivate her acquaintance. Can you wonder that I learned to love one so sweet and beautiful?"

"I wonder at your presumption in telling her so!" flashed the angry guardian. "If you loved her you should have worshiped her from afar as a star too far away to warm you with its beams. By Jove! sir, do you know that Bonnibel Vere will be my heiress? Do you know that the best blood of the land flows in her veins? Do you know that her father was General Harry Vere, who fell bravely in battle, and left a record as proud as any in the land?"

"General Vere's fame is not unknown to me, sir," answered Leslie, calmly. "I give him due honor as a hero. But, sir, my blood is as blue as Bonnibel's own! I belong to the noblest and best family of the South. True, we lost all our wealth by the late war, but we belong to the first rank yet in point of birth. I can give you perfect satisfaction on these points, sir. And for the rest, I do not propose to claim Bonnibel until I have realized a fortune equal to her own, and added fresh laurels to the name that is already crowned with bays in the far South, from whence I come. My father was an officer in the army, too, sir, and not unknown to fame."

"We waste words," said the millionaire, shortly. "No matter what your birth, you were presumptuous in addressing my niece, knowing that your poverty must be an insuperable bar to your union. Perhaps it was her wealth you were after. The idea of making love to that child! She *is* but a child, after all, and does not know her own mind. A simple, trusting child, ready to fall a prey to the first good-looking fortune-hunter that comes along."

"Were it not for your gray hairs, Mr. Arnold, I should not permit you to apply such an insulting epithet to me!" flashed out Leslie Dane in a white heat of passion.

"You provoked it, sir," cried the old man, wrathfully; "*you* to try to win my little ewe-lamb from me. She, that her dying mother, my only sister, gave to my arms in her infancy as a precious trust. Do you think I would give

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