

**ALEX.
MCVEIGH
MILLER**

AN OLD MAN'S DARLING

Alex. McVeigh Miller
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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, "Bonniel." 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 unfailing 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 her to you, or to any man who did not stand head and shoulders above his fellow-men in every point of excellence? Would I waste her sweet years waiting for you to grow worthy of her? No, no, Leslie Dane, you can never have my darling! She shall never give you another thought. Go, sir, and never darken my doors with your unworthy presence again!"

He pointed to the door, and the young artist had no choice but to obey. He was trembling with passion, and his dark eyes blazed with a light not pleasant to see.

"I obey you, sir," he said, proudly. "I go, but remember I do not give up my claim on Bonnibel! Sooner or later she shall yet be my wife! And, mark me, sir, you have done a bitter work to-day that you shall one day repent with all your soul."

With the words he was gone, his tall, proud figure striding down the graveled walk, and disappearing in the twilight shadows.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Arnold and his family, consisting only of his wife and step-daughter, Felise Herbert, were in their places at the table before Bonnibel came floating in, a vision of rosy, innocent loveliness.

If she had been beautiful before in her plain blue walking-dress she was doubly so now in her soft white robe of India muslin, with fleecy trimmings of rich Valenciennes lace. A pale blue sash was knotted about her slender waist, and clusters of fragrant blue violets looped back her long golden curls. A golden chain and a cross studded with pearls was clasped about her white neck, though she scarcely needed such adornment. Her beauty was a crown in itself.

She came in a little shyly, and blushing very much, for she expected to see her lover, and she glanced under her long lashes along the length of the table as she took her place, expecting to meet his adoring gaze.

He was not there.

The young girl scarcely knew what to think. She glanced at her uncle as if to enlighten herself.

He was not looking at her; indeed, he seemed to avoid her glance purposely, and a moody frown was fixed upon his brow. Her aunt vouchsafed her a cold, unmeaning stare, and Felise Herbert's large black eyes dilated as she looked at Bonnibel as if with gratified malice.

These two ladies, mother and daughter, deserve more than a passing mention at our hands. We will briefly describe them. Mrs. Arnold was a fine-looking brunette of about forty-five, and would have been rather handsome but for a settled expression of peevishness and discontent that rested upon her features. She was elaborately dressed in a soft summer silk of silver-gray trimmed in black lace, and wore very rich cameo jewelry.

Miss Herbert was a younger and handsomer copy of her mother. She was tall and well-formed, with quite regular features, large black eyes, and silky braids of black hair. She was about twenty-five years old, and was becomingly dressed in a thin black grenadine, richly trimmed with satin of the color of old gold. Her ornaments were necklace, earrings, and bracelets of gold. Mr. Arnold could not complain of the beauty of his household, though his tastes in that particular were extremely refined.

"Bonnibel," he said, when the dinner which had been discussed in most unusual silence was over, "come with me into the library. I have something to say to you."

Bonnibel linked her arm fondly in his and they passed out together.

Miss Herbert looked at her mother, and a glance of great significance passed between them, the expression of discontent on the elder lady's features now deepening to positive anger and hatred.

"Yes," she said, as if answering her daughter's look; "go and hear what he has to say to the little witch!"

Miss Herbert arose and passed out of the room with soft, subdued footfalls.

Mrs. Arnold paced the floor restlessly, clenching her white hands angrily.

"My clever, beautiful Felise," she murmured. "How my husband slights, and ignores her to lavish his whole affection upon that little hateful, yellow-haired child! After all my scheming to get him to love Felise, and at least divide his fortune between them, he boldly declared this evening to that young artist-fool that he would make Bonnibel his heiress. And Felise—she will have nothing but what I can give her out of my portion! which he will make as small as possible in order to enrich his idol. It is too bad—too bad! Something must be done to induce him to change his mind. I wish she would elope with Leslie Dane. That would alienate my husband from her forever."

The entrance of the servants to clear the table interrupted her. She left the room, with its glitter of lights and glass, silver and flowers, and hurried away to her own luxurious apartments to nurse her wrath and jealousy in solitude.

She hated Bonnibel Vere, and she hated her husband. He had married her twenty years ago, when she had palmed herself off upon him as a widow of high family and small means, while in

reality she was a vulgar and penniless adventuress, having but one pure affection in her heart, and that her blind, idolatrous love for her spoiled and wayward little daughter.

Francis Arnold had discovered the cheat practiced on him long ago, and though too proud to proclaim the secret to the world, the love he had felt for his handsome wife had changed into quiet contempt that stung her more than the loudest upbraidings.

Her daughter, who was treacherous as a cat and vindictive as a snake, he simply hated, and no blandishments or persuasions could induce him to settle anything upon her, though the one object of the mother's heart was to secure his whole fortune for herself and Felise.

We will pause in our contemplation of the ambitious woman's rage and follow Bonnibel and her uncle to the large, well-lighted, and elegant library.

"Uncle," said the girl, going up to him as he sank into his easy-chair, and laying her hand caressingly on his cheek, "are you not well? You seem so strange, you do not smile on your little girl as usual."

He was silent a moment as if struggling for words in which to express his grievance, then he broke out impetuously:

"I am sick, little one, sick at heart. I have received a dreadful blow this evening—one that fairly stunned me!"

"Dear uncle," said she, with innocent unconsciousness, "who was it that dared to wound you so?"

"Bonnibel, it was Leslie Dane, the poor young artist whom I have patronized this summer because I pitied him! Darling, he had the audacious impertinence to ask me for this little hand!" he lifted it from his shoulder, where it rested fondly, and pressed it to his lips.

But Bonnibel caught it away and started back from his side, her cheeks growing white and her blue eyes dilating.

"What did you say to him?" she inquired, breathlessly.

"I told him he was a worthless fortune-hunter, and I drove him forth with scorn and contempt," said the millionaire hotly.

"You did—you did!" she cried, horror and incredulity struggling in her voice and face. "You insulted him thus? Why, Uncle Francis, I *love* him!"

In those concluding words there was at once a protest and a defiance. It was as if she had felt and said that *her* love should have been a sufficient shield and protection for him it clung around so fondly.

"Pooh! nonsense!" said Arnold, trying a light tone of railery; "you are but a child, Bonnibel, you do not know what love means. Do you think I would suffer you to throw yourself away on that worthless fellow?"

"He is not worthless," she cried out warmly. "He is noble, good and true, and I love him dearly. But, Uncle Francis," she said, suddenly changing her indignant tone to one of gentle entreaty, "surely you are only jesting and teasing your little girl, and I beg you not to use such dreadful language again, for you insult the man whom I love with my whole heart, and whom I shall one day marry."

"Never! never!" he shouted madly. "Girl, you have been spoiled and indulged until you are silly enough to cry for the moon and expect me to pluck it from heaven for you! But I will save you from your folly this time. I will *never* permit you to marry Leslie Dane!"

It was the first time he had ever denied her anything in the course of her happy, care-free life. And now his cruel and resolute refusal of this new toy she wanted so much, absolutely stunned her and deprived her of speech.

She sank into a chair helplessly, and looked at him with parted, tremulous lips, and with wild, astonished blue eyes. He saw how shocked and incredulous she was, and altering his tone, began to explain and argue with her:

"My darling, Leslie Dane is no match for my little girl. He is poor and has nothing to recommend him but a handsome face, and a little talent for daubing with paints and pencils, while

you are a beauty and an heiress, and can boast a proud descent. I have made my will, and it is there in my desk this moment. In it I have left you everything except one-third of my property, which my widow will legally inherit. Surely my generosity merits the one little return I ask of you. Simply that you will give up Leslie Dane."

She looked up at him as he offered his costly bribe, and shook her head gravely.

"You have been very kind to me always, uncle, I never knew you could be cruel until now. I thank you for your kind intention, but I will not give up Leslie for such a sordid bribe. Keep your money, and I will keep my love!"

"I am not giving you the choice, girl," he answered, angrily. "I intend you to have the money whether you want it or not, and I have already said that you shall *never* marry Leslie Dane."

"And I say that I *will* marry him!" she cried, springing up in a rage as passionate and unreasoning as his own, her blue eyes blazing with defiance. "You shall not prevent me! I love him better than any one else on earth, and I will marry him if I repent it every hour of my after life."

So saying she rushed from the room, and pausing only to catch up a dark shawl and wrap it about her, she sped down the graveled walk on her way to seek her lover.

She paused outside the gate, and crouching down, peered anxiously back to see if she was followed. The moon was up, shining brilliantly over everything. She saw her uncle come out on the piazza and drop into his favorite seat. Then the fragrance of a cigar floated out on the warm August air. Bonnibel hurried on down to the shore.

Leslie Dane was waiting for her, pacing the sands impatiently in the soft moonlight.

CHAPTER IV

Bonnibel ran forward and threw herself on her lover's breast in a passion of tears.

"You know all then, my darling?" holding her fast against his wildly-throbbing heart.

She could not speak for the sobs that came heaving from her aching little heart.

Bonnibel had never wept so wildly in all her life. It seemed to her that she would die of her grief as she lay panting and weeping in Leslie's tender arms.

"Do not weep so, my little love," he whispered. "We were too sanguine of success. But try to bear it bravely, my Bonnibel. We both are young. We can bear to wait a few years until my success is assured, and then I will claim you for my own in spite of all the world!"

Bonnibel did not answer. She continued to sob heart-brokenly, and Leslie could feel her little heart beating wildly against his breast as if it would burst with the strain of her grief.

So absorbed was he in trying to comfort the agitated girl that he did not hear the sound of an approaching footstep.

The next moment Wild Madge, the sibyl, stood before them, and the echo of her weird and mocking laugh blent strangely with the hollow beat of the Atlantic waves.

"Aha," she cried discordantly. "You weep, my bonny maid! Ah! said I not that the clouds of sorrow hung low over that golden head?"

Bonnibel started and clung closer to her lover, while a tremor shook her frame.

Leslie turned angrily and rebuked the old woman.

"Begone!" he said sternly. "How dare you come prowling about this lady with your croakings of evil? Never dare to address her again."

Wild Madge retreated a few steps and stood looking at him malevolently in the moonlight. Again her laugh rang out mockingly.

"Never fear, fond lover, Wild Madge would not harm a hair of that bonny head you shelter on your breast. But destiny is stronger than you or I. Her doom is written. Take the little maid in your arms and spring out into the sea there, and save her from the heart-aches that are beginning now!"

"Begone, I say!" reiterated the young artist threateningly.

"I obey you," said the sibyl, retreating, with her mocking, discordant laugh still ringing in their ears.

"Bonnibel," he whispered, "look up, my sweet one. The crazy old creature is gone. You need not fear her predictions—they mean nothing! Try and calm yourself and listen to me. I have much to say to you to-night for it is the last time we shall meet until I come to claim my bride. In a few hours I must leave here. To-morrow I shall be on a steamer bound for Europe."

"So soon?" she gasped brokenly, stifling her anguished sobs.

"The sooner the better, darling. I must not dally here when I have so much work to do. Remember I have fame and fortune to conquer before we meet again!"

"It will be so long," she moaned, slipping out of his arms and sinking down on the pebbly beach with her face hidden in her hands.

Leslie picked up the shawl which had slipped from her shoulders and wrapped it carefully about her, for the sea-air was chilly and damp.

"It may seem long to us now, dear," he said, sitting down beside her, "but in reality it will pass very quickly. I shall work very hard with such a prize in view, and I hope the time of our separation will not be long. I shall go at once to Rome and place myself under the best masters. I have genius, for I feel it within me, and the critics already admit it. Never fear, darling, but that my success will be speedy and sure."

"But away off to Rome," said the girl. "Oh! Leslie, that seems as if you were going out of the world. Why need you go to Italy? Cannot you study here in this country?"

"Not so well, my little love, as in Italy, where I can have better masters, and better facilities for studying the paintings of the world's greatest artists in the beautiful old churches and cathedrals. I must have the best instruction, for I want to make the name you will bear an honored one."

She lifted her beautiful, tear-wet face in the moonlight, and said, gently and simply:

"We need not wait for fame and fortune, Leslie. Take me with you now."

For a minute Leslie Dane could not speak. She waited, *patiently* for her, laying her hands in his, and looking up into his face with eyes beautiful enough to lead a man's heart astray and bewilder his reason.

"My child," he said, presently, "I wish that I might do so, but you know not what you ask. You have been reared in the lap of luxury and pride. You could not live through the deprivation and poverty I must endure before I conquer success."

"I could bear anything better than the separation from you, Leslie," said the poor child, who had but the faintest idea what those two words, "poverty and privation," meant.

"You think so, dear," said the artist, "because you do not know the meaning of poverty; but adversity would wither and destroy you as quickly as some hot-house blossom would die when transplanted to regions of ice and snow. No, darling, I am too proud to take you now in my obscurity and poverty. Let us wait until the name I can give you shall be an honor to wear."

"It must be so if you wish it, Leslie," she answered, sadly; "but, oh, how can I bear the long separation when I love you so devotedly?"

"It will not be for long, dearest—two or three years at best. The time will pass quickly to you in your happy home, under the devoted care of your Uncle Francis—only you must not permit him to alienate your affections from me, for that I am sure is his present intention."

She was silent, resting her head against his supporting arm, and passing her small hand wearily over her brow as if to dispel some gathering mist from her sight. The solemn, mystical sound of the foam-capped waves breaking silently on the shore seemed strangely pathetic to her ears. They had never sounded so sad before.

"Darling, of what are you thinking?" he asked, gently.

She started and shivered, lifting her white face up to his with a look that nearly broke his heart, it was so pitifully pathetic. He had never seen anything but happiness on that beautiful face. Why had he won her love only to plant the thorns of sorrow in that fond and trusting heart?

"Leslie, dear," she said, in a strangely altered voice, "do you believe in presentiments?"

He started at the words.

"Bonnibel," he answered, "I hardly know whether I do or not. It would be very superstitious to believe in such things, would it not? And yet may not a merciful Providence sometimes vouchsafe us warnings of things, as the Scotch say, 'beyond our ken'? My darling, why did you ask me that strange question?"

He took her little trembling hand in his and looked searchingly into her face.

"Leslie," she said, "I have such a strange feeling. Perhaps you will laugh at it. I should have laughed at it myself two hours ago."

"Tell me, dear," he pleaded; "I will not even smile."

She looked up with something like awe shining in her large eyes.

"Leslie, I can hardly find words to put this strong presentiment in; but I feel that if we part now—like this—that before you win the honors you covet, some terrible bar of fate will come between us and sunder us so widely that we shall never meet again."

The low, impressive words fell heavily on his heart, chilling it like ice. How strangely they sounded from his little Bonnibel, who but an hour ago was as gay as a butterfly in the sunshine. Now the very elements of tragedy were in her voice and face. A jealous pang struck him to the heart.

"Bonnibel," he said, quietly, "do you mean that your uncle would marry you to someone else before I came back to claim you?"

"I do not know," she said; "I hardly think my feeling was as clearly defined as that. It was a dim, intangible something I could not fathom, and took no peculiar shape. But he might try to do that, for, oh, Leslie! Uncle Francis is terribly angry with us both."

"I am quite aware of that, my dearest," he answered, bitterly. "But, Bonnibel, this presentiment of yours troubles me. Perhaps I am foolish, but I have always been a half-way believer in these things."

"Leslie, I believe it firmly," she said, choking back a sob that rose in her throat; "Uncle Francis will dig some impassable gulf between us. When we part to-night, it will be forever."

Hiding her face on his shoulder she sobbed aloud. Poor little bonny bird! she had been soaring in the blue ether, her fair plumage bathed in sunshine all her life. Now her bright wings were clipped, and she walked in the shadow.

"My love has only brought you sorrow," he said, regretfully.

"No, no; you must not think so," she answered, earnestly. "It seems to me, Leslie, that I have never fully lived until this summer, when I met and loved you. Life has seemed to have a fuller, deeper meaning; the flowers have been sweeter, the sunshine fairer, the sound of the sea has seemed to have a voice that spake to me of happiness. If you had gone away from me with your love untold I should have missed something from my life forever. You do not guess what a wealth of love is in my heart, Leslie. It is not your love that brings me sorrow; it is the dreadful, dreadful parting with you!"

He pressed her hand in silence. A terrible temptation had come to him. He was struggling mutely against it, trying to fight it down in all honor. But love and jealousy fought madly against white-handed honor.

"If you leave her now, in her beauty and youth," whispered jealousy, "some other man will see that she is fair. She will forget you and wed another."

"Make her your own *now*," whispered love.

He was young and ardent; the warm blood of the South, whose flame burns so hotly, fired his veins. He looked at her sitting there so angelically fair in the beautiful moonlight, and knew that he should never love another as he loved this beautiful, innocent child. If she were lost to his future life what profit could he have in wealth and fame? Love and jealousy conquered.

He drew her to his side with a passionate clasp, longing to hold her there forever.

"Bonnibel," he whispered, "do not be frightened at what I am going to say. I am afraid that they will marry you to some other while I am gone away. Your uncle may persuade you against your will, may even bring force to bear with you. But there is one way in which we can bridge any gulf they may dig between us, darling. Will you marry me secretly to-night? I can leave you more willingly, then, knowing that no power can keep us apart when I come to claim you."

"Marry you to-night?" gasped the child. "How can I do that, Leslie?"

"Nothing easier, darling. Only a mile and a half from here is the little fishing village of Brandon. We can take your little skiff and go down, be married by the Methodist minister there, and return in a few hours, and then I can leave you without being haunted by a terrible foreboding of losing you forever. They will think you are asleep in your room at home, and no one will miss you or be the wiser for the precious little secret that we will keep sacredly until I come to claim my little wife. Bonnibel, will you make this great sacrifice for love? It will make our future happiness secure."

"Yes," she whispered, without a moment's thought.

CHAPTER V

The fairy little bark, the *Bonnibel*, swept blithely out into the moonlighted waves.

Bonnibel tied her lace handkerchief over her head, and wrapped the shawl about her shoulders.

Somehow her heart began to grow lighter. This moonlight flitting seemed so sweet and romantic.

Her dark-eyed lover sitting opposite lightly swaying the oars looked handsome as a demi-god to her partial eyes. She trusted him implicitly.

"The king can do no wrong," was her motto.

"You shall never regret this step, never, my darling," Leslie Dane kept saying to her over and over, as if to soothe his conscience, which perhaps reproached him.

And Bonnibel answered with a smile every time, "I never expect to regret it, Leslie, dear."

His rapid strokes of the oar soon brought them to their destination. Brandon was a poor little fishing village consisting only of the rude huts of the fishermen, a little Methodist chapel, and a little parsonage down by the shore rather neater than the rest of the shanties.

Here lived the aged minister and his kind old wife. Thither the young artist directed his steps with Bonnibel clinging to his arm.

Fortunately they met no one on the way, and almost before they knew it they stood in the shabby "best room," which served the good man for study, library and parlor.

There the minister sat with his books, and the good wife with her knitting.

Leslie Dane drew the old man aside and they held a brief whispered colloquy. Apparently the young man made everything satisfactory, for in a minute he came back and led Bonnibel forward to breathe those solemn vows which are so quickly cemented but which death alone can sunder.

Bonnibel was trembling very much, though the hitherto thoughtless child did not in the least realize the magnitude of the step she was taking.

She only thought to herself how sweet it would be to be bound by that sacred tie to Leslie Dane, and she quivered from head to foot with pleasure, and with a certain indefinable nervousness she did not begin to understand, while the two old people stared at her in surprise at her radiant beauty and costly dress.

The solemn words were soon spoken, Leslie making the responses firmly, and Bonnibel in a hushed little voice that was scarcely audible. The young man slipped a ring over her finger that he had always worn on his own, the minister blessed them, the good wife kissed the girl with tears in her eyes, for women always weep at a wedding. Then Leslie slipped a generous fee into the old man's hand, and led his blushing bride away.

"God bless you, my darling, and may you always look back to this hour as the happiest one of your life," he whispered, as he put her into the little skiff and kissed her beautiful lips with an outburst of passionate tenderness.

"I wish you the same happiness, Leslie," whispered the happy little bride.

"In a little while now we shall be parted," said he; "oh, my Bonnibel, how much easier the parting will be when I know that I am leaving my wife behind me—my wife whom no one can keep from me when I come for her."

"It was a happy thought of yours to bind me thus," answered the young bride, softly. "Now that grim presentiment will haunt me no more, and Uncle Francis cannot hurt me with his threats or his coldness while I have this precious secret in my heart."

"Bonnibel," he said, anxiously, "in some moments of defiance you may feel tempted to taunt him by the betrayal of our marriage; but I implore you do not yield to the temptation. More serious consequences may follow than you dream of. Let our secret be a dead secret until I give you leave to proclaim it."

"I will never reveal it, Leslie, I give you my solemn word of honor," replied Bonnibel, earnestly.

"Thanks dearest. I only asked the promise because I knew it was for the best. Darling, I shall think of you always while I am absent, and I will write to you very often. Will you write to me sometimes, and let me know that you are well and happy?"

"I will write to you often and let you know that I am well; but I can never be happy while I am separated from you, Leslie," she said, sadly.

"Bonnibel, how beautiful you look in that white dress," he said, changing the conversation abruptly, seeing that it pained her. "You were the finest bride I ever saw."

"It is a pretty dress," she said, looking down at the soft mass of muslin and lace; "but I little thought when I put it on for dinner this evening that it would be my bridal dress. I shall always love this dress, Leslie. I will keep it always in memory of to-night."

Both were silent after a little while, till Leslie said, abruptly:

"Bonnibel, I wish I knew of what you are thinking so intently."

"I was hardly thinking at all," she said, quickly. "Some verses were running through my mind that I read this evening in Jean Ingelow's pretty poems. I hardly understood them then, but they seem to suit my feelings now."

"Let me hear them," said Leslie.

"I cannot recall them, except the last verse. The poem was called 'Divided,' and the last verse, which is all that I clearly recollect, ran thus:

"And yet I know, past all doubting truly—
A knowledge greater than grief can dim—
I know as he loved he will love me duly,
Yea, better, e'en better than I love him.
And as I walk by the vast, calm river,
The awful river so dread to see.
I say, thy breadth and thy depth forever
Are bridged by his thoughts that cross to me."

"Beautiful," said Leslie, as the full voice, tremulous with newly awakened feeling died away. "You must always recall those lines when you think of me, my little one."

The keel grated on the shore. Leslie looked at his watch in the moonlight.

"It is later than I thought," he said, hurriedly, as he helped Bonnibel out upon the shore. "I have but fifteen minutes to reach the station. Darling, I must go to-night, though it nearly kills me to leave you."

She turned quivering and weeping, to throw herself upon his breast.

"Darling, you are not afraid to go to the house alone?" he whispered. "My time is so short!"

"No, no," she said. "But, Leslie, how *can* I let you go?"

"'Tis but a little while," he answered, soothingly. "Be brave, my precious darling!"

He drew her to his heart with a long, despairing embrace, and kissed her passionately.

"My little love, my own sweet *wife*, good-bye!" he faltered, and was gone.

Bonnibel threw out her yearning arms as if she would draw him back, then turned and staggered homeward.

"I *will* be brave," she murmured. "I will try to bear it, but, oh, this pain at my heart."

She opened the gate and went softly up the walk. It was almost midnight, and she began to wonder if the doors would be locked.

"If they are I shall have to get in through the window," she said to herself.

But as she stepped on the piazza she saw the front door open and her uncle sitting motionless in his easy chair.

"Poor dear," she thought, with a thrill of regretful tenderness, and forgetting herself entirely. "He has fallen asleep in his chair and they have all forgotten him. I will wake him with a kiss."

He lay with his head thrown back, apparently fast asleep. Gliding softly along, she threw her arm about his neck and, bending over, pressed her sweet lips to his brow.

She started back with a shiver and looked at him. The brow she had kissed was cold as ice. Her hand fell down upon his breast and came in contact with something wet and cold. She lifted her hand and saw upon it in the moonlight a dark stain.

"Uncle!" she screamed, "oh, God, uncle, wake up!"

That wild scream of agony roused the house. The servants came rushing out, but before they reached her Bonnibel had fallen fainting at her uncle's feet. The beautiful white dress she had promised to keep in memory of that night was all dabbled and stained in a pool of his life-blood that had dripped down upon the floor.

CHAPTER VI

Francis Arnold was dead. The soul of the proud millionaire, the disappointed husband, the loving uncle, had been hurried prematurely before the bar of Eternal Justice. In the stillness of the summer night while he rested in fancied security beneath his own roof-tree, the angel of sleep pressing down his weary eye-lids, the deadly destroyer had crept to his side, and red-handed murder had struck the cowardly blow that spilled his life blood.

They came hurrying out—the servants first, the wife next, the step-daughter last—all roused by that piercing shriek of agony—and found him sitting there dead, with Bonnibel lying lifeless at his feet, her white robes dabbled and stained in the blood upon the floor.

They brought lights and looked at him. Yes, he was cold and dead. There was a great scarlet stain on his white vest where the deadly weapon had entered his heart. The blood had dripped down in a great pool upon the floor and was fast stiffening on his garments.

Mrs. Arnold shrieked aloud and went into horrible hysterics, laughing wildly and maniacally, and tearing her hair from its fastenings; but Felise Herbert stood still as a statue of horror, looking at the dismal scene. Her pale face was paler than ever, and her large, black eyes looked wildly about her. She made no effort to arrest her mother's frenzied cries, but stood still as if frozen into ice, while the maids lifted up the still form of poor Bonnibel and carried her through the drawing-room window, laying her down gently, and applying restoratives.

Life came swiftly back to her under their influence. She lifted her head, and opened her eyes upon the faces around her just as a shrill and piercing whistle announced the departure of the train which was bearing her young husband away from her for years—perhaps forever.

Bonnibel sprang up and went out on the piazza again. As she stepped to the side of that lifeless form, Felise Herbert, just waking from her apparent trance of horror, waved her hands in the air, and cried out solemnly and sepulchrally:

"Oh, Heaven! It is Leslie Dane who has done this dreadful deed. That was what he meant by his dark threats this evening!"

"Leslie Dane has killed him!" echoed her mother, wildly.

"It is false, woman! How dare you accuse him of such a deed?" Bonnibel cried out fiercely, wild with grief and horror; then suddenly she looked at the half-dazed men-servants standing around their master helplessly.

"Idiots!" she cried, "why do you stand here idle? Why does not some one bring a doctor? Perhaps he is not dead yet—he may be revived."

They brought a physician at her bidding, but when he came his services were needed for her, not for the pale corpse down stairs that would nevermore want the physician's potent art. They had taken her by force to her room, where she was wildly walking the floor, wringing her hands and raving over her loss.

"You are dead, Uncle Francis," she cried, passionately; "you will never speak to me again. And I had left you in anger. We never quarreled before—never! And without a good-bye kiss, without a forgiving word, you are gone from me into the darkness of death! They have killed you, my dear one!—who could have been so cruel?—and you will never know how I loved you, and that I forgave you for your cruelty so soon, or that I wished to be reconciled. Oh, God! Oh, God!"

She told her story frankly to the good old doctor when he came and questioned her. She and her uncle had quarreled because he had denied her a darling wish. She had rushed out of the house in a fit of anger, and moped about the seashore until late into the night. Then she had returned, and seeing him sitting there on the piazza she had felt her anger melting into tenderness, and stolen up to give him the kiss of reconciliation, but found him cold and dead.

She told the same story when the inquest was held next day, blushing crimson when they asked her what she and her uncle had quarreled over.

"It was a purely personal matter," she answered, hesitatingly. "Is it necessary to reveal it?"

They told her it was necessary.

"He refused to sanction my engagement to my lover, and drove him away from the house with cruel, insulting words," she answered briefly through her tears and blushes.

"And you were very angry with your uncle?"

"Yes; for a little while," she answered frankly; "but when I came back to the house I was ready to forgive him and be friends with him again. He had never been unkind to me before, but indulged me in every wish, and petted me as my own father might have done had he lived. I was almost wild at first with surprise and anger at the first denial I had ever received from him; but I soon overcame my indignant feelings, and when I came back to the house I loved him as fondly as ever."

She left the room immediately after giving in her evidence, overcome with grief and emotion, and going to her room, threw herself down upon the bed, from which she did not rise again for many weeks. Grief and excitement precipitated her into a brain fever, and for many days life and death fought persistently over their unhappy victim.

Had she known what would take place after she left the room she would have remained until the inquest was over. Felise Herbert and her mother boldly declared their belief that Leslie Dane was the murderer of Mr. Arnold. From the drawing-room windows which opened out on the piazza they had overheard the conversation between the two men relative to Bonnibel, and they detailed every word, maliciously misrepresenting Leslie Dane's indignant words so as to place the worst construction upon them. One or two of the servants had heard also, and from all the testimony elicited the jury readily found a verdict of willful homicide against Leslie Dane, and a warrant was issued for the young man's arrest.

But poor little Bonnibel, tossing up-stairs in her fevered delirium, knew nothing of all this. If she had known she might easily have cleared her lover from that foul charge by proving that he had been with her during those fatal hours in which Mr. Arnold had met his death.

It remained for her to prove his innocence at a darker hour than this, and at the sacrifice of much that she held dear.

Mr. Arnold's body was carried to his winter residence in New York, and buried from thence with all the pomp and splendor due to his wealth and station. Felise and her mother, of course, accompanied the remains.

The housekeeper at the seaside home was left in charge of the hapless Bonnibel, who lay sick unto death in her luxurious chamber, tended carefully by hirelings and strangers, but with never one kiss of love to fall on her fevered brow in sympathy and tenderness.

Love had gone out of her life. With the young husband adrift now on the wide sea, and the kindly uncle lying in his gory grave, love had gone away from her.

She had no kindred now from whom to claim tenderness or care, so only hirelings were left to watch the spark of life flickering so feebly day by day, that it seemed as if it must surely go out in darkness. They were all who heard the wild, passionate appeals for Leslie and Uncle Francis that were always on the sufferer's lips as she babbled incoherently in her wild delirium.

Mrs. Arnold and Felise remained in New York for several weeks, attending to business affairs and superintending the making up of very fashionable and cumbrous mourning.

Mrs. Arnold did not provide any of this raiment for Bonnibel. She sincerely hoped that the girl would die of her fever and preclude the necessity of so doing.

But youth is very tenacious of life. Bonnibel, in her illness and desolation, would willingly have died to please her aunt, but destiny had decreed otherwise.

There came a cool, still night in September when the nurses hung carefully around the bed waiting for the crisis that the doctor had said would come at midnight. It came, and the reaper, Death, with his sickle keen, passed by on the other side.

In the meanwhile outraged justice was on the *qui vive* for the escaped homicide, Leslie Dane. It was rumored that he had sought refuge in a foreign land, but nothing definite could be learned regarding his mysterious whereabouts.

CHAPTER VII

October winds were blowing coolly over the sea before Bonnibel Vere arose from her sick-bed, the pale and wasted shadow of her former rosy and bewildering self.

She had convalesced but slowly—too slowly, the physician said, for one of her former perfect health and fine constitution. But the weight of grief hung heavily upon her, paralyzing her energies so completely that the work of recuperation went on but slowly.

Two months had elapsed since that dreadful night in which so much had taken place—her secret marriage and her uncle's murder.

She should have had a letter from her young husband ere this, but it was in vain that she asked for the mail daily. No letter and no message came from the wanderer, and to the pangs of grief were added the horrors of suspense and anxiety.

A look of weary, wistful waiting crept into the bonnie blue eyes that had of old been as cloudless and serene as the blue skies of summer. The rose forgot to come back to her cheek, the smile to her lips. The shadow of a sad heart was reflected on her beauty.

"Upon her face there was the tint of grace,
The settled shadow of an inward strife,
And an unquiet drooping of the eye,
As if its lid were charged with unshed tears."

The first day she sat up Mrs. Arnold came in to see her. She had only returned from the city a few days before and was making preparations to go back for the winter season. She sent the nurse away, saying that she would sit with Miss Vere a little while herself.

It was a lovely day, warm and sunny for the season, and Bonnibel sat in her easy-chair near the window where she could look out upon the wide expanse of the ocean with its restless blue waves rolling in upon the shore with a solemn murmur. She loved the sea, and was always sorry when the family left their beautiful home, Sea View, for their winter residence in the city.

"You have grown very thin, Bonnibel," said her aunt, giving her a very scrutinizing glance, as she reclined in her chair, wrapped in a warm, white cashmere dressing gown, to which her maid had added a few bows of black velvet in token of her bereavement. "It is a pity the doctor had to shave your hair. You look a fright."

Bonnibel put her hand up to her brow and touched the soft, babyish rings of gold that began to cluster thickly about her blue-veined temples.

"It is growing out again very fast," she said; "and it does not matter any way. There is no one to care for my looks now," she added, thinking of the uncle and the lover who had doted so fondly on her perfect loveliness.

"It matters more than you think, Bonnibel," said Mrs. Arnold, sharply, the lines of vexation deepening in her face. "It behooves you to be as beautiful as you can now, for your face is your fortune."

"I do not understand you, aunt," said the young girl, gravely.

"It is time you should, then," was the vexed rejoinder, "I suppose you think now, Bonnibel, that your poor uncle has left you a fortune?"

Bonnibel looked at her in surprise, and the widow's eyes shifted uneasily beneath her gaze.

"Of course I believe that Uncle Francis has provided for my future," said the girl, quietly.

"You are mistaken, then," snapped the widow; "Mr. Arnold died without a will and failed to provide for either you or Felise. Of course, in that case, I inherit everything; and, as I remarked just now, your face is your fortune."

"My uncle died without a will!" repeated Bonnibel in surprise.

"Yes," Mrs. Arnold answered, coolly.

"Oh, but, aunt, you must be mistaken," said Bonnibel, quickly, while a slight flush of excitement tinted her pale cheeks. "Uncle Francis did leave a will. I am sure of it."

"Then where is it?" inquired Mrs. Arnold.

"In his desk in the library," said the girl confidently. "He told me but a few hours before his death that he had made his will, and provided liberally for me, and he said it was at that minute lying in his desk."

"Are you sure you have quite recovered from the delirium of your fever?" inquired the widow, scornfully. "This must be one of the vagaries of illness."

"I am as sane as you are, madam," said Bonnibel, indignantly.

"Perhaps," sneered Mrs. Arnold, rustling uneasily in the folds of her heavy black crape. "However that may be, no will has been found, either in the desk or in the hands of his lawyer, where it should most probably be. The lawyer admits drawing one up for him years ago, but thinks he must have destroyed it later, as no trace of it can be found."

"I have nothing to live upon, then," said Bonnibel, vaguely.

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 *parti* 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 housekeeper 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 befallen 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 flouted 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 sibyl, 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 went 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 bonnie 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 sibyl, 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."

"And so I will, if I get a chance," said Felise, coarsely. "I have been stinted 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 servants' 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 scolds her day in and day out. Janet says that Colonel Carlyle will catch a Tartar when he gets her."

"Be quiet, Lucy; my head aches," said Bonnibel, 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 Bonnibel'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 Bonnibel 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 Bonnibel 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, Bonnibel 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 Bonnibel 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 Bonnibel Vere and Colonel Carlyle which Felise Herbert so greatly dreaded and deprecated.

As the autumn months merged into winter Bonnibel 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 Lethean 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 Bonnibel 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 shoppers, for Christmas was drawing near, and people were busy providing holiday gifts for their dear ones.

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