

THE WICKED WOODS OF TOBEREEVIL.

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CHAPTER XXI.—(Continued.)

May perceived this yielding of her aunt with dismay and resentment, and the ceremony of the talking over produced no satisfactory results. Miss Martha, on this occasion, found her sitting in the farthest corner of her room, under the sloping wall, with her hands locked in her lap, and her mouth tightened up into a straight line of determination.

"I know what you are coming to say, Aunt Martha," she said, drawing still farther back into her corner, but speaking loud and plain: "I never expected that you would go over to the enemy."

"The enemy, my darling! Indeed, there is no enemy. I am just going to ask you to think seriously of the thing. The young man is good and amiable, and will make an excellent husband. My May would be a lady, and could go and come when and where she liked."

"I don't want to go, nor to come," said May, "only to stay where I am"; and she locked her feet together, as if, in that identical corner, she had resolved to live and die.

"I should no longer have any anxiety about providing for your future."

"Never mind that, aunty; I can turn milk-maid any day."

"You shall not need; but what I mean to say is, that a good husband is a treasure not to be met with every week."

"But I don't want a good husband every week, nor any week, nor a bad one either. How nicely you have done without one yourself, Aunt Martha!"

"Oh! of course, if you desire to be an old maid"—said Miss Martha.

"I do not desire it; I desire nothing of the kind; but I had rather put up with it, as you have done, aunty, than sell myself, for even twenty thousand a year."

"My dear, you never spoke to me in that way before. Nobody ever said yet that I 'put up with it.' I have always"—

"Now, now, aunty," said May, springing from her corner at last, and putting her arms around the old lady's neck, "you know very well that you put up with it because you could not marry the person you like; and I love you for doing it, and I mean to do the same."

"Do the same!" echoed Miss Martha, in astonishment; and then she saw that May's eyes were wet with tears.

"The very same!" said May, laughing. "And you must promise to say nothing more about this matter; but try to get Mrs. Lee to take her poor son away. It is quite time that we two old maids had this house to ourselves again."

On Friday morning, as May walked down the garden path, a gentleman met her coming towards the house. He was dressed like a clergyman, but carried a gun. He took off his hat, and introduced himself as a friend of Mrs. Lee, who had come by appointment to see that lady. May bade him welcome, and accompanied him to the house, knowing very well that here was the parson come to marry her. She conducted him to the parlour where Christopher was sitting, and did not think it advisable to awake Mrs. Lee, who had slept longer than usual, in consequence of much trouble and excitement, and many wakeful nights.

What passed between Christopher and the parson has never been recorded. After they had been for some time shut up together, May saw, from an upper window, the two men walking side by side down the path to the gate. Christopher was leaning on his stick and walked slowly, and looked downcast but dignified. The parson was nodding his head, and talking briskly; and as he went away shook hands a second time with Christopher over the gate; then Mr. Lee returned slowly to the house.

Soon afterwards Mrs. Lee came to light, and held private converse with her son for half an hour. There were sounds of weeping from the parlour during this time; and at last Christopher led back his mother to the door of her own room, where she returned to bed, and would take comfort from no one. Miss Martha sat with Christopher the rest of the day, while May kept aloof, feeling like a culprit. In spite of all she knew to the contrary, it seemed as if she must be to blame for Christopher's mishap.

Towards evening she ventured to show her face in the parlour. Aunt Martha had left Mr. Lee to take a nap in his chair, but the young man was wide awake when May came stealing in. She brought him a vase of the latest flowers, including the very last rose of summer, as a needless peace-offering, and a vain little temptation to make him glad. Christopher was not at war with her, but he could not be glad. He smiled over the flowers, and thanked her for her trouble; and then he had a little more to say.

"I am sorry and ashamed for all the trouble you have had with us," he said. "It was a monstrous thing to torment you as my mother and I have done. I beg of you to forgive and forget what has passed. We shall leave you to-morrow, full of gratitude for all the kindness you have shown to a sick man; and by and by I shall set to work and be a new creature. Will you give me your hand in token that we are friends?"

"Right willingly," said May, giving her hand, and feeling sorely distressed. Christopher's eyes filled with tears, and he raised her fingers to his lips. While she thus stood beside him, and he kissed her hand, there was a witness of this scene of forgiveness and farewell. The leaves fluttered at the window as the shadow came among them, and then disappeared. Christopher saw nothing, for his face was turned from the window; but May had glanced up quickly and seen—Paul.

She snatched her hand from Christopher with a little cry. "What is it?" he said, fearing he had offended her; but she said: "Oh nothing!" and muttered something about the window, so that

he thought she had seen a strolling beggar; but May was gone from the room before he could make up his mind. She had nearly run down Bridget, who was bringing in the tea-tray and candles, and then stopped in the hall, and assured herself that she ought to go to her own room. What, hide in her own room when Paul was outside, hurrying away, never to come back any more! He had come at an unlucky moment, and had seen what might make him think that he need not come again. She wrung her hands in an agony of indecision, and finally flew down the passage to her own room.

But at the end of the passage, there was an open door, through which the moon was shining, and just hard by there lay on a bench a white apron belonging to Bridget, and a large woollen shawl of vivid colours, which the handmaid was wont to wrap round her head and shoulders. May seeing these, a merry idea sparkled up through all the troubles in her mischievous head. She tied on the apron, and threw the shawl over her head, wrapping it well about her face. She turned up her long dress, and made the apron very conspicuous. Then she went out of the door, and set off running across the fields.

Paul, meanwhile, walking along the meadow-path, stopped at the stile to take a last look at the moonlit ruins and the cottage with the red lights in the windows, and thus caught sight of (apparently) Bridget coming running to overtake him, with her white apron flying, and her head and shoulders swathed up in the identical shawl, which he, in his character as peddler, had bestowed on her. May was at that moment thinking also of the peddler, and thinking delightedly that she was going to trick Paul as cleverly as Paul had once tricked her.

"Oh, masha, sir!" she said, as she stopped, panting beside him, and mimicking Bridget's voice, but ye do step out fast an' strong! long life to your honor! Sure the breath is gone from me wid the runnin'. An' the mistress waitin' the tay on yer honor; an' begs wid her compliments, that ye will come back at wanst, sir, and not go 'way in such a burry."

"I am much obliged to your mistress," he said, "but I could not think of intruding myself on the family at such a time."

"Thia sich a *what* time, yer honor?"

"Why, at a time when you are preparing for a wedding," said Paul.

"You will please take back my good wishes and farewell." "Oh, but please yer honor, the mistress'll not be satisfied wid that for an answer. An' the weddin's not to be till—to-morrow," said May, with a mischievous delight in tormenting him a little longer. "An' we're not so busy as ye think. She wants to see yerself. She's *desperr* anxious to see you," emphasizing Bridget's favorite word.

"So the wedding is to be to-morrow, is it? Well, tell your mistress I congratulate the bride, and I certainly shall write to Miss Mourne—the elder lady, I mean—before I sail from the country."

"An' ye won't come back, sir?" said May, feeling blankly that she had gone too far in humoring his fancy about the wedding.

"No, my good girl; I am sorry for giving you so much trouble. You will please take this little present from me to buy a new dress."

May was dazed with her utter failure. She had just enough presence of mind to know that she ought to keep up the character she had assumed; she must accept the money, and Bridget should be the richer for it. But May quite forgot that though she had borrowed Bridget's shawl, Bridget's hands were at home; and she held out a hand which was surely her own, and which Paul knew as well as he knew her face. How could brown, buxom Bridget give forth such a bit of snow into the moonlight?

"What is this? May!" cried Paul, looking down at the little hand as if it had been a thing not of flesh and blood.

"It means that Bridget wanted to thank the peddler for her shawl," said May, dropping a courtesy. "That is all it means. An' now, please, sir, shall Bridget take back your message to her mistress?"

"I feel that I ought to be highly flattered by this mark of attention from Mr. Lee's bride," said Paul with some scorn in his face, as he drew back a little, as if in disgust, from the very lovely figure which the moonlight shone upon.

"Don't call hard names if you please," said May. "I am not accustomed to it. I never was called a bride before in my life."

"This is strange conduct," said Paul, sternly, "for a lady who is going to be married to-morrow."

"It would be a little odd in that ease," said May.

"Would be? Why, do you forget that you have just told me that the wedding is to be to-morrow?"

"So it is," said May, plucking the thi-tledown that grew by the style. "Bauey Fegan and Judy Lynch are to be married in the morning. Tenants of Aunt Martha's. Bridget is to be the bridesmaid."

"Pshaw!" said Paul, impatiently, with a stamp of his foot. "Have I not spoken with the parson who was brought here especially from Dublin to perform a marriage at Monasterlea?"

"Have you?" said May. "How simple you are, both you and he. It is only in romances that one hears of a wedding without the consent of the bride."

"Then you are only trifling with this poor man and his wonderful fortune—just as you are trying to make a fool of me!"

The moonlight gleamed vividly a moment on a little white wrist and hand, as May tossed up her handful of thi-tled-down into the air; and then she turned suddenly round upon Paul. For one moment she looked the image of womanly indignation, and opened her lips to speak her mind in good earnest; but suddenly her mood changed. Without saying a word she threw Bridget's shawl once more over her head, dropped a prim courtesy to her unmanageable lover, and set off walking as fast as she could towards the house. Upon this Paul regained his senses immediately, and found that he was not at all prepared to turn about and continue his way towards Australia, without further explanation of the state of affairs at Monasterlea. His pain had made him rude, and at least he could not go without offering an apology. He started off to follow May, and, with a few swift strides, came to her side.