

MAUREEN LACEY.

(BY ROSA MULHOLLAND, in the *Irish Monthly*.)

CHAPTER II.

THE next night a yellow moon hung high over Bofin, gilding the spars of the Liverpool trader, rocking still in the harbour. The headlands lay like good-natured giants smiling in their dreams, and an ocean of silver glimmered out of the obscurity of space and washed their feet. Along the road to the North Beach a man was plodding with a parcel under his arm. There were few in the island would walk abroad, alone, once the night had set in, for the spiritual population of Bofin is said to outnumber those who are counted in flesh and blood, and the night is the elfin day. Men and women shut themselves into their cabins at twilight and love not solitary walks. But Con Lavelle was one of the few. It is customary to bring a friend for support upon the mission on which he was bent. Con had his reasons for going alone. His expedition was a forlorn one. Why should another behold his defeat?

Con Lavelle had loved Maureen Lacey long. Last night had shown him that if his chance were not speedily improved it would very quickly become nothing. The Widow Lacey smiled on him he knew, for she reckoned on Con's soft nature and Con's good farm to help her out of many of her difficulties. This was little, however, while Maureen was cold. Last night he had seen her melt and brighten, and though the change, he knew, had not been wrought by him, his heart had so ached at her more than wonted beauty, that he could not, like a wise man, turn his face the other way and think of her no longer. No, he would have his chance out. He would offer her his love, and if she would not have that, he would bribe her with his comfortable house, his goodly land, and help and protection for her family. If Maureen could not give him her love, he would grieve; but, if Maureen could be bought, he would buy her.

This was the state of Con's mind when he lifted the Lacey's latch. As ever, the place was lighted by the fire, and there was an air of hush and tidiness within that betokened expectation of something unusual. The children were all in bed, the house was swept, the bits of tins and crockeries were all straight on the humble dresser, the few rude chairs were ranged with precision along by the walls. Maureen's stepmother was dozing in her little straw chair in the warmest corner. Maureen stood on the hearth, in her work-a-day crimson petticoat and loose bodice of print, with the blaze playing over her pretty bare feet, not yet spoiled by exposure, and deepening the rose flush on her cheeks, and gilding the wilful ripples of her hair that would creep out and keep straying about her forehead. Twice Maureen had slipped "down to the room," and pressed her face to the one little pane of the window, and peered forth at the night without, where the yellow moonlight fell rich and flat on the rugged causeway, and the silver Atlantic shifted and glimmered between the grey stone walls of the neighbouring cabins. And the last time she had withdrawn her face with a gesture of dismay. This was not the shape she wanted to see, this loose swinging figure coming along with its awkward shadow.

Con lifted the latch and came in. The noise awakened the widow, who hailed him with glad surprise. "What can bring him to-night again?" flashed through the minds of both the women, followed also by the same surmise, only the latter was with one a hope, with the other a fear. Maureen's "Save ye, Con!" was only a feeble echo of her stepmother's greeting, wrung from her by the absolute requirements of hospitality. Curiosity was quickly allayed, and hope and fear confirmed. Advancing to the dresser with a sheepish air, the visitor set down a bottle of whiskey, pipes, and tobacco. Thus his errand was at once declared. Con Lavelle had come "matchmaking."

The stepmother rubbed her wasted hands with delight. "You're welcome, Con, agra, machree!" she said. "Maureen, set out the table, an' fetch the glasses, an' fill the pipes."

Maureen did as she was bidden, uncorked the bottle, and handed the glass, and kindled the pipe to her mother, all with a set defiance on her face, which did not escape the timorous suitor.

"Ye'll be come on business, Con?" began the widow.

"Ay," said Con, blushing and fidgeting. "I come, Mrs. Lacey, to ask yer daughter for a wife. God sees I'll make her as good a husband as iver laid all he had in a girl's lap and only axed for hersel' in return."

"It's throe for you, Con dear," said the stepmother. "Oh, an' ye have her with my heart's best wish. Come down, Maureen, and give yer han' to yer husband."

Maureen had been standing, pale, over in the shadows, at the dresser. Now she moved down to the hearth, "Not my husband," she said, "an' niver my husband. In my heart I'm thankful to ye, Con Lavelle, for thinkin' kindly of a poor girl like me, but I cannot take yer offer."

"Good Lord, sich talk!" cried the widow, enraged. "Don't mind her, Con, asthore, it's only a way girls has, likin' to keep them-sel's high, an' small blame to them! She'll be yours, niver fear, an' willin' an' plased on her weddin'-day."

"Mother," said Maureen, "where the use of talkin' this way? Yer not my God, nor my maker, that ye have a right to han' over my soul an' body to this man or that man again my will. An' you, Con Lavelle, yer a decent man, an' ye wouldn't be for takin' a girl to yer wife that had her heart set in one that wasn't you. I'm a pledged wife, an' as good as a wife this minit in the eyes of the Almighty above; an' throe and fast I'll stan' to my word, so help me Christ, my Saviour!"

Slowly, and with a stern reverence in her tone, Maureen uttered these last words, her eyes on the ground and her hands squeezed together. Con hung his head and hoped no more, and the stepmother rocked herself to and fro in her feebleness, and raged with disappointment.

"You bould hizzy," she cried. "Oh, you bould, shameless hizzy, that's been decavin' me all this time! Goin' jiggin' to yer dances an' makin' yer matches, an' throwin' dust in the eyes of the poor sickly mother at home. Oh, you bad onnatural daughter."

"Aisy, aisy, Mrs. Lacey," put in soft-hearted Con. "Throth I'll net listen to that from ye. If Maureen cannot like me, I'll tell the truth o' her. She's the good hard-workin' daughter to you, whatever!"

"Hould yer tougue!" shrieked the passionate woman. "What do you know about it? Troth ye take yer answer kindly. It's always the likes of a soft fool like you that gets the worst of it while the world's goin' roun'. Oh, wirra, wirra, that iver I should rear sich a daughter!"

Maureen stepped up to Con and put out her hand. "I thank ye," she said, eagerly "for puttin' in that kind word for me. I have thried to do her biddin', an' God sees it's her own fault that its come to this so soon. I'm rale grateful to ye, Con, an' if I could make two women o' mysel', wan o' me should be yer wife. Bein' only wan, I must go after my heart."

Big tears swelled up in Con's eyes as he shook her hand and let it drop. "It's throe for you, Maureen," was all he said.

"Oh!" cried the stepmother, fiercely—"oh! if I could just get my tongue about that limb of the devil, Mike Tierney—"

"God save all here!" said a hearty voice, as the latch was lifted and Mike himself stood amongst them. Maureen, blushing, fell back into the shadows and left the battle to him.

"Lead us yer arm, Con," cried the stepmother, trying to stand. "Begone!" she shrieked, shaking her puny fist at Mike, "begone from my house, you thief, you beggar!"

"Troth, yer not well, Mrs. Lacey, dear," said Mike, "yer not well at all. An' it's Con's fault here for givin' you too throug a taste o' this fine whiskey o' his, an' you so wake about the head. Sit down now, Mrs. Lacey, asthore, an' rest yersel' a bit," he went on coaxingly, slipping her hand from Con's arm, settling her in her chair, and drawing a seat confidentially beside her. "An' feth ye may make yer mind aisy about thieves an' beggars, for there isn't a soul of sich a crew in the house at all: sorra wan; nor out bye neither, for the moon's as bright as daylight, an' I couldn't miss but see them if they were there."

All this was poured forth in Mike's own rolling, coaxing, devil-may-care tone, completely drowning any attempt of the widow's to finish her interrupted volley of abuse. She sat grasping the sides of her chair, in silence, and mentally scratching his face.

"Oh, the impudence of ye!" she hissed between her teeth, at last, "to think to come round me with yer blarney. I know yer errand—"

"You do, Mrs. Lacey?" said Mike, "you know that Maureen—" here his eyes deepened and flashed, and a smile overspread his brave face as he glanced at a shadowy corner opposite, "that Maureen has promised me her own sel' for a wife gin this day year when I come home from my voyage? Ye've heard of the shtrange vessel that's been lyin' below all week. Well, the captain is a decent man, an' he's offered to take me with him in his ship, and promised to put me in a way of earnin' in a year as much money as'll do all I'll want it to do. On this day twel'month I'll come back a well-to-do man, please God, an' I'll buy the best holdin' in Bofin, save an' exceptin' Con Lavelle's here. Maureen has give me her word to wait for me. An' that's my errand, to tell ye all this that's arranged betune us."

This information of Mike's threw a light on the widow's perplexity, and the storminess of her wrath became somewhat calmed.

"Ye'll niver come back," she said, with a sneer, "wanst yer off out of Bofin with yer blarneyin' tongue an' yer rovin' ways, sorra fut will ye iver set in it again."

"Don't say that, Mrs. Lacey," said Mike, gravely. "You musn't say that, an' me ready to swear the contrary."

"Ay," she sneered again; the likes o' ye'll swear to anything; but who'll heed ye? I say it would be better for Maureen to take up at wanst with a decent man like Con Lavelle there, sitting peaceable at home on his farm, than to be waitin' for year's till a rover like you takes the notion to turn up again from the other ind o' the world. Which ye niver will."

"Well, Mrs. Lacey," said Mike, drawing himself up, and speaking solemnly, "I'll give Maureen her lave, full and free, to marry Con Lavelle come this day year, if I be not here to claim her first myself."

"Ay," said Maureen, looking suddenly down from the shadows; "an' I'll give my word full and free to marry Con Lavelle come this day year if Mike be not here to claim me first."

"Ye'll swear that?" said the stepmother.

"Ay, we'll swear it both if you like," said Mike, smiling proudly down on Maureen.

"He's ready enough to han' you over, Maureen," said the widow, with another of her sneers. "Ye'll be feared to do the same by him I'm thinkin'."

Maureen made no reply, but slipping her hand out of Mike's went over to the dresser and reached up for something, to a little cracked cup on the shelf.

"Here's two rings," she said, coming back to the hearth, "wan I got on the last fair day, an' the other I got last night in Biddy Frendergast's cake. There's for you, Con, and there's for you, Mike. Wan o' you men'll put wan o' them rings on my finger come this day year; Con, if I'm left for him; Mike, if he's home in time. This I swear, mother, in spite o' yer tants, an' by the Blessed Vargin I'll keep my oath!"

A silence fell on the group. The blaze of the fire dropped down, and a shadow covered the hearth. A momentary cloud passed over Mike's proud face in the flush of its rash happy confidence. Was it a whispered reminder of the perils that beset the sailor abroad on the seas—of storms, of great calms, of ships drifted out of their tracks? But Mike was not one to fret his mind about shadows.

"Ye'll drinke to that all round?" said Con Lavelle, presently.

"Ay, we'll drinke to 't," said Mike, gaily; and Maureen mending the fire, a jovial glow lit up the house once more.

Con Lavelle had become a different man within the last few minutes. His dejected face was kindled, and his brawny hand shook as he poured the whiskey into the glasses.

"Here's to Maureen's happy weddin' on this day year!" he said, knocking the glass against his teeth, as he raised the spirit to his lips. "Amen, amen," went round in reply, and matters being thus