

"Don't be absurd, Tom," interrupted the lady. "You are a gallant gentleman, truly, to see a female in distress and not aid her."

"Have I not offered six times at least, May, and been refused?"

"And will be again, sir. This is the most lovely piece of holly I have seen this season, and I am determined that no other fingers than mine shall touch it, until I give it to my dear Jack, when he comes this evening. They don't grow holly in India, do they Tom?"

"No, I think not."

"Then it will be a welcome offering to an English heart. Oh! how glad, how very glad I shall be to see the dear old fellow."

"If you speak so enthusiastically, May, 'pon my word I shall be jealous," remarked the gentleman.

"Jealous—you! and Jack? Nonsense. Why, Tom, I love him like a brother. We were brought up, you know, as children together."

"So he told me, May, when we met in India, and he gave me the letter of introduction to the rector. Indeed," proceeded Thomas Mildmay, still inspecting the gathering of the holly, which persistently clung to its parent stem, "he spoke so incessantly about you that I fancied—"

"Pray what, sir?"

"That there existed a deeper affection than a brother's and sisters, May."

"Which shows how you were deceived. Talk of women jumping at hasty conclusions! Men are a thousand times worse. There, after all you must lend me your knife, Tom; the branch will not break, it is so tough."

Thomas Mildmay produced it, again offering his services, which, notwithstanding the obstinacy of the holly, were again rejected.

"Cut upward, not downward, May," he cried, suddenly stepping forward; "the knife is sharp."

The warning came too late; the keen blade had flashed through the

tough fibres, and penetrated May's white, slender finger.

It was not a very serious cut, but sufficiently so to cause the blood to leap forth. The cry she uttered was echoed by her companion, whose arm quickly encircled her dainty waist as he caught her hand in his.

"O dearest!" he exclaimed in concern, "why did you not permit me?"

"Because," answered May, a little pale, "I said no one should touch this branch but myself, Tom, and no one shall. But see!" and she held the holly towards him—"there is blood upon it, and it is a bad omen."

He glanced at the bough, and truly, fallen on it, as bright as the berries themselves, were the crimson drop.

"Bad omen, May!" he laughed, wrapping her wounded finger in his handkerchief. "What childishness! Why, you are absolutely pale. 'Pon my word, your concern for Jack is already making me jealous."

"Don't let it do that, Tom," she said bravely.

"Why not?" he smiled.

"Because, Tom, you are, I believe, the best-tempered man I ever knew, but—"

"But?" he questioned, fondly regarding her.

"I am sure you love me so truly that, were you jealous of any one, I imagine that you would not be answerable for your actions."

He caught her in his arms and pressed a kiss on her smooth cheek.

"My darling, you are right," he replied gravely, in his turn. "If I thought I should lose you, or another was seeking to win you from me, I think I should either kill him or myself."

"Now you are talking pure nonsense, Tom, dear. Let us go in," she laughed, and, taking his arm, they moved over the crisp, frosty lawn to the quaint old rectory, a very Jack in the green of ivy which encircled its highest gables. But, even during the embrace, May had kept the holly-branch from coming in contact with Thomas Mild-