

Thomas Mildmay by her side. His face was very white, his brows contracted, his lips compressed.

"May," he said hoarsely, "I have heard every word. I was yonder," pointing to the conservatory. "What is all this? What does he mean by your deceiving him?"

"Tom, I know no more than you; unless he has taken a childish joke in seriousness. Papa shall set him right."

"No; he has called me a coward, accused me of worse. The task must be mine, and the explanation and the apology must be made to-night."

He moved away. She tried to stay him, but for once he was deaf to her voice. The outer door banged, and striding over the snow, Thomas Mildmay followed John Westmacott, who with a persistency for which an old tutor could not account, refused a bed at the rectory, and had started for the village.

The snow had ceased, but a tempest of wind had arisen; the leafless trees seemed like wands before it, and the waves were heard breaking in bursts like thunder upon the shore, not a mile distant. The sky was clear and drear, only the earth was white. A mountain stream, which, when the rains or snows came, swelled into the dimensions of a river, intersected the road leading from the rectory to the village, and on this night it rushed and eddied in whirling foam between its banks and the sea. Spanning its flood was a bridge, about which grew a few firs and larches.

It was here that Thomas Mildmay overtook John Westmacott. What passed between them we need not minutely recount. It was accusation and refutation first, speedily followed by angry words, blended with threats. Then there was a blow, a sharp, short struggle, and one man quitted the spot, while the other laid on the river's bank, with his face on the snow, motionless and still,—by his side a spray of the holly-branch May

Westleigh that morning had gathered.

### CHAPTER III.

Not proven. That was the verdict.

John Westmacott, there was good reason to believe, had been murdered by Thomas Mildmay. The two young men had quitted the rectory together, each bound for the village. Only one, however, Thomas Mildmay, had arrived at the inn, his clothes in disorder, his manner agitated, and his shirt front stained with blood. The next morning John Westmacott was missing.

Search was made, and not only indications of a severe struggle were discovered on the left bank of the river, but also the impress of a man's body in the snow, and a sprig of holly, a gold seal and a cane, all of which were John Westmacott's property. But the body of John Westmacott was absent.

On being arrested, Thomas Mildmay confessed that he and John Westmacott had fought by the bridge,—upon what matter he refused to state. But he declared the impress on the snow was his own; that he had been struck down insensible by his opponent; that, on recovering, he had found himself alone, and, fearing to alarm the inmates of the rectory, had gone to the inn.

Some believed this story. May did from her heart. Nevertheless, circumstantial evidence was against him. On such a night, the body of a man thrown into the river would have been whirled down to and lost in the ocean like a whisp of straw.

Still, as no body could be found, the direct proof of murder was wanting, the Scotch jury brought in "Not Proven," and with the brand of Cain on his forehead, which only the appearance of John Westmacott in life could remove, the accused was released, condemned mutely, if not openly, by the public voice.

"Then what do you think has become of him?" asked the rector, sad-