

# **THE MYSTERY OF WOODCROFT**

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The Mystery of Woodcroft by Anonymous

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**ANONYMOUS**

**THE MYSTERY  
OF WOODCROFT**



THE FAMILY STORY-TELLER.



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THE MYSTERY OF WOODCROFT.



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# THE MYSTERY OF WOODCROFT.

## CHAPTER I.

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**T** is very nice of you to—to like me, Mr. Linton!"

"I don't merely like you—I love you, Hilda, with my whole heart and soul!"

"I cannot understand why," the girl answered musingly, without a touch of embarrassment in either speech or manner. "I cannot in the least see why you should—love me, Mr. Linton; still it is very nice. I had never heard a kind word since I was quite a child until you came here."

Victor Linton's fair boyish face flushed and his lips quivered.

"Poor little Hilda—to have received kindness from no one but a nurse, an Indian ayah! I never had much faith in the genuineness of East Indians, but I shall think well of them in future because one was good to you."

"Oh, don't pity me—anything but that!" The girl's dark eyes flashed ominously. "I should prefer a slap in the face to being pitied. The girls at the school begin 'psalm-singing' sometimes, and I feel that I could kill them. I suppose you will end by hating me very soon? Miss Morgan says that I have a heathenish temper, and that I am a daughter of Satan!" she added drearily.

"Miss Morgan ought to be ashamed of herself. The idea of a school-mistress using such abominable language to one of her charges!"

"Well, you see, I called her an old witch," Hilda said naively; "I couldn't help it! She is so exasperating with her maxims and proverbs for the tiniest, teeniest little irregularity!"

"'Irregularity' is politic," laughed Victor Linton. "What wicked-

ness does it not cover? But, seriously, I think that Miss Morgan should be taught to moderate her language. I will speak to the Rector. He takes the class in Divinity—doesn't he?—and he and I are great friends already. A well-timed rebuke——”

Hilda's eyes were alight with amusement.

“Foolish Mr. Linton! Don't you know that Miss Morgan annihilates the timid Rector with a glance? Besides, the dear old gentleman has already given me several lectures.” The girl shook her head doubtfully. “I wonder sometimes if I am really as bad as they say I am. I really am afraid that my case is hopeless! Miss Morgan declares that I am wilful, disobedient, and wicked, and that, as I am the biggest and oldest girl in the school, my example is most demoralising. I think that I should be inclined to be penitent if she were less of a humbug.”

The dark eyes flashed wrathfully. The young man pressed a lock of the girl's raven hair to his lips, and kissed it hastily. Hilda flushed from annoyance, and drew farther away from him.

“Why will you be so silly, Mr. Linton? I have told you before that I don't like that sort of thing! I want to believe you to be brave and manly; I am sure that you are big enough to know better!”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Carrington,” Victor said in mock dismay; “but I couldn't help it—really! If I may be so bold as to remind you, you thought it the usual thing for lovers to kiss each other.”

“But we are not lovers. What a horrid idea!”

“Not lovers? And we have been meeting in secret for weeks! Not lovers? And your witchery has enchained me to these Welsh mountains when I ought to be grinding at my desk in London! For your sake I have deceived my dear old governor into believing I am ill and require a long holiday! I have stooped to shameful deception, then, all for nothing?”

The girl gazed at him with startled eyes.

“Didn't I tell you how it would be from the very first?” she asked miserably. “I am a wretch, and I always bring trouble! But it was so nice to have one friend—one person who did not scold and sneer! You have talked of loving me and all that sort of thing, and then I have begun to be afraid. What am I—to be loved and cared for? A homeless dependant upon the bounty of my uncle, who hides himself—like the hermit that he is—away at gloomy Woodcroft.”



She pointed fiercely over Llanberis, to a range of hills which stood out almost phantom-like against the pale-orange sky.

"I have heard of Sir John Carrington," Victor Linton said, "but I never connected you with him, Hilda."

"No," she answered witheringly—"because he is rich, and I am so wretchedly poor, with hardly a decent rag to my back! And that is the man who doles out a miserable pittance for my education and maintenance. Bread-and-margarine for breakfast and tea, and stringy meat and waxy potatoes for dinner! Ugh—it's horrible! And then to be reminded of it half a dozen times daily, and to be told that, if it wasn't for my kind-hearted, generous, and noble-souled uncle, I should be thrown upon the world to earn my own living! I went to the Castle once, and—and he had me turned away! I should like to kill him!"

She clenched her hands.

Victor Linton was becoming interested, and his warm heart was full of love and pity for the friendless girl.

"And is Sir John your only relative?" he asked.

"Oh, I've got a father somewhere out in India! He is a captain in Her Majesty's service; but he never troubles himself about such an awkward encumbrance as a daughter." Tears glistened on the girl's dark lashes, though the eyes beneath them gleamed resentfully. "I can remember him; he was called 'Handsome Carrington,' just as my uncle is known as 'Mad Carrington.' He broke my mother's heart. Then he married again; and my step-mother used to slap me. I think I scratched her face, though!" she added, with evident relish. "Well, I must go back to school; and I am sure to drop in for a lecture. Miss Morgan told me not to go out without permission, and I defied her, and she has written to Sir John."

Victor was silent for a little while, but his eyes never left the girl's rebellious face.

"Good-bye!" she said, suddenly holding out her hand. "The sun is setting. Look—you can see the towers of Woodcroft peeping over the trees!"

Victor took the little brown hand and held it within his own; then he drew the girl nearer to him.

"Hilda," he said tenderly and earnestly, "I am glad that you have told me so much about yourself."

"Are you?" She sighed.

"Yes—because it makes me more hopeful."

"And yet you pretend to like me! My misery pleases you!"

"I have told you that I don't like you, but that I love you—love you! And, now that I know that you are utterly friendless, I am not afraid to tell you, because I want to take you away from here." He bent nearer and whispered—"I want you to marry me, Hilda!"

She looked up at him almost bewildered.

"I—I am astounded, Mr. Linton. I should be of no use as a wife. I know nothing about housekeeping, and I should be ruinously extravagant. I can talk French and play the piano, but I detest figures! Still of course I am only eighteen, and I might learn heaps of things"—she looked wistfully in the direction of Woodcroft Castle—"and I think I could love any one intensely who was kind to me! I know that I should be faithful and true till death. But I hate in just the same way as I love."

"You must love me, Hilda—you must—you shall! I want you to marry me—I want you for my very own! I am not a rich man, but I have enough for a modest little home somewhere in London. I am a lawyer, junior partner in a firm of which my father is the head, and I write a little for the magazines."

"Do you really write stories, Mr. Linton?" Hilda asked with sudden interest.

"Yes." He positively blushed. "Can't you call me 'Victor'?"

"Why, yes! I think Victor a capital name for a man; and you look as though you might become a 'victor'—a hero!"

"If I were fighting for you, Hilda, I should know no fear."

"I believe you—you have such clear steadfast eyes! And I think that I am beginning to appreciate you!" She spoke very softly now, and her eyes became misty. He dared not trust himself to answer; his heart seemed to be leaping as though it would choke him. "Now, as regards your proposal, Victor, I want to be perfectly frank with you. Hitherto I had regarded you more in the light of a pleasant chum than anything else. You can't be very old."

She glanced at him quizzically.

"Twenty-four," he answered stoutly.

"And I am sure you did not think seriously of me for ever so long after we met at the Rectory six weeks ago."

"No—I did not," he confessed.

"You called me by slang names, and taught me to smoke cigarettes."

"Don't ever do it again, Hilda!" he pleaded earnestly. "I ought to have known better, but——"

"Yes—I know—I was such a Tartar! Now you will please tell me what has wrought this mysterious change in you, Mr. Linton! I have lost my chum."

"And have found a lover for life! Why have I learned to love you? Because you are so true-hearted, so original—and you have the loveliest eyes in all the world!"

Miss Carrington flushed now.

"Victor!" She glanced down at herself deprecatingly. "You will have to take me as I am; I have only my Sunday frock besides these faded things, and in money I possess just two shillings and ninepence-halfpenny. I counted it after dinner, and wondered if I could afford a new pair of gloves. My devoted father has forgotten my existence; I haven't had a letter from him for years, so there will be no help from that quarter. And, although my uncle is wifeless and childless——"

He kissed her suddenly on the lips, and was delighted to see the colour rush into her cheeks.

"That was taking a mean advantage!" Hilda said coldly.

"Don't be cross, dear—I never did it before!"

"And you must not do it again until this matter is settled between us."

"You talk as if it were a business contract, but I believe that the depths of your heart are stirred at last."

"And, although my uncle is wifeless and childless," she continued, "I have no claim upon him. Miss Morgan has told me that he is a very clever man, and has deserved well of his country. He was in the diplomatic service, or something of the kind, long before I was born. My father is many years younger than he, and, I suppose, received a younger son's portion and squandered it. I know that he has always been miserably poor. Then it was a mean thing to send me to Llanberis! We are not Welsh people at all, and Sir John only purchased Woodcroft Castle so that he could hide himself from the world which knew him.