

## THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

A Romance.

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.

(Continued from page 88.)

"Oh, you are very kind; and I dare say I do very well as a makeshift when there is no more exciting amusement to be had."

"Oh, Laurence how can you say such cruel things! Are you angry because I went to Denham Court, and because I enjoyed myself? I couldn't help it, everybody was so kind. But I thought of you all the time, and I wished with all my heart that you had been there."

He was touched at last; the hand with which he had been angrily pulling at his moustache dropped, and he was turning slowly toward me, when the church clock and the far-off Beaconsburgh town-hall clock began to strike seven together.

"Oh!" said I, half turning instinctively toward the house. "What is it?" asked Laurence, suddenly stiffening again.

"Mr. Rayner. I promised to be in the drawing-room to accompany his violin at a quarter to seven."

"Pray, don't let me detain you," said he between his teeth. "I am sorry I came at all to disturb you in your meditations upon your late enjoyment. But as I shall leave Geldham for the future in two days, and shall not have another opportunity of seeing you before I go, I took the liberty of coming round this way. Good-night and good-bye, Miss Christie. I wish you another pleasant evening with Mr. Rayner."

He shook hands with me, and dashed away through the plantation before I could find voice to call him back. I sat there staring at the pond until Mr. Rayner himself came out in search of me; we went in, and I sat down to the piano, and he took out his violin.

But the spirit was not in me on this night, and I played the notes loudly or softly as was marked, without a spark of the fire which is the soul of music. Mr. Rayner stopped, put down his violin, and said—

"Come and sit by the fire."

"Oh, Mr. Rayner, I am so—"

"Yes, I know. You are so very sorry that you can't help thinking Denham Court a livelier place than the Alders, and so very sorry that you were obliged to leave a lot of nice, bright, amusing people there to come back to a couple of very worthy, but prosy people who—"

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Rayner, I ought never to have gone at all."

"And now tell me all about Denham Court."

"Mr. Rayner, such a strange thing happened that I must tell you about it. I put my pendant into my desk—at least, I am almost sure I did—on Saturday night, and next day it was gone."

"Well, we must find you another."

"Oh, no! But this is the strangest part. Just before I left this morning, Mr. Carruthers' servant put it into my hand, saying he had picked it up on the stairs. And the little shield with the initials were broken off and lost. Isn't it strange?"

"Well, not considering that they were paste. If they had been diamonds, I should say it was very strange that he gave it back again. I suppose there were some ladies there with jewelry that made your eyes water."

"They didn't wear much; but I believe some of them had a great deal. One lady—she was the wife of a very rich merchant, who wasn't there—had dazzling diamonds, they said."

"And what was the name of the fortunate lady?"

"Mrs. Cunningham. She has one set of what they call on-eyes and large diamonds which she keeps—"

"That she keeps where?" said Mr. Rayner, yawning, as if tired.

"Oh, that she keeps always concealed about her person!" said I.

"Do you mean it?" he asked, much interested.

"Yes, really. She told me so. And nobody in the house, not even her maid, knows where they are. She sleeps with them under her pillow."

Mr. Rayner rose.

"Well, I don't think even the responsibility of diamonds under your pillow would keep you awake to-night, for you must be tired out."

## CHAPTER XIX.

Mr. Rayner was right. I was very tired; and the next morning I overslept myself, and I did not come down-stairs until breakfast was more than half over. I found Mrs. Rayner in outdoor dress at the table.

"Well, Miss Christie, we have all got tired of you; so we are going to leave you all alone at the Alders," said Mr. Rayner, when he saw my astonished face.

I found that he was going up to town for a few days on business, he said; but he should combine pleasure with it—go the rounds of the theatre, and perhaps not be back until Saturday. This was Tuesday.

"Would you like to go to Beaconsburgh with us? You have no lessons to do, as Haldee is still in bed, and Mrs. Rayner will have a companion to drive back with."

When we got to the station, we found that we were there a great deal too soon. Mr. Rayner walked up and down, talking to the station-master and the people he knew. He said to me once, when I was standing by him—

"If anything should happen while I am away—if Haldee should get worse, or Mrs. Rayner frighten you, or anything—telegraph to me at once at the Charing Cross Hotel. You will find some forms in my study, and you will just write it without delay."

He said good-bye affectionately to his wife and kindly to me; and we saw him off, and then drove back to Geldham.

I spent a dull day; for when I went to see Haldee, Mrs. Rayner instantly left the room, and I could not help seeing that it was to avoid me; so I was obliged to resist the sick child's entreaties for me to stay.

It was about seven o'clock when Jane came up.

"I heard Miss Haldee calling for you, miss; and I don't believe she knows what she's saying, poor little dear; they ought to send for the doctor; but I don't suppose they will. Sarah don't care, and Mrs. Rayner don't care—that's about it, miss."

And Jane gave me a nod and an expressive look as I went out of the room with her.

My teeth chattered as I went through the passage; it was so cold; and what was my surprise to find, when I got to the end, that the window had been left open on this chilly and wet October evening! I took the liberty of shutting it, and, returning to the dressing-room door, I tapped softly at it. I could hear Haldee's voice, but I could not hear what she said, and Mrs. Rayner sobbing and calling her by name. I went in softly, and with a shriek the mother started up from her knees; she had been on the floor beside the bed. Haldee knew me, though her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright with fever.

I sat on the bed and tried to make her lie down and keep the clothes over her, for the room was as cold as the corridor. Mrs. Rayner was clinging to the rail at the bottom of the little bed and watching me with eyes as glittering as the child's. I

felt just a little tremor of fear. Her bosom heaved and her hands clutched the rail tightly as she said:

"What right have you to come here? Are you not snug and warm up-stairs in your turret? Why must you come and exult over me! Can you not spare her to me now she is dying?"

"Not dying, Mrs. Rayner; don't say that. I came down just to see if I could be of any use. And wouldn't it be better to send Sam to Beaconsburgh for Dr. Lowe?"

Her manner changed. As she looked at me, all the anger, all the little gust of defiance faded out of her great eyes, and she fell to sobbing and whispering:

"I dare not—I dare not!"

"May I take her into your room, Mrs. Rayner?"

"Yes, no."

"Then, if you will allow me, I will take her up into mine."

Mrs. Rayner stared at me helplessly.

"Will you dare?" she asked, fearfully.

"Certainly, with your permission."

"You know very well that my permission is nothing," sobbed she.

I wrapped the child up well in a blanket, thinking I would put her in my own bed, until her little one could be taken upstairs.

I turned to Mrs. Rayner.

"Don't be alarmed about Haldee," I said gently. "I'll take great care of her. And if you will just give your consent, I will send for a doctor on my own responsibility."

The poor thing stooped and kissed one of the hands I held round her child.

"Heaven bless you, Miss Christie!" she murmured; and, turning away, she burst into a flood of tears.

She would not listen to the few incoherent words I said to comfort her; and I was obliged to leave the room with tears in my eyes, and carry my little patient up-stairs.

And now how to get a doctor? I went down to the nursery, called Jane, who was just going to bed, and asked her where Sam slept.

"In the village," said she.

Jane was to young to be sent all that way alone at night, the cook to old. There was only one thing to be done; I must go myself.

"Go and ask Cook to lend me her big round water-proof cloak, Jane," said I, "and bring me one of Miss Haldee's Shetland veils."

She ran away, astonished, to fetch them; and then, seeing that I was in earnest, she helped quickly and well to make me as like a middle-aged country woman as possible. Then she let me out, giggling a little at my appearance, but promising faithfully not to leave Haldee till my return.

I felt rather frightened at the boldness of my undertaking as I heard the hall door close upon me, and realized that I had nothing to protect me all the long three miles and a half of road to Beaconsburgh. I had got past the last of the Geldham cottages, when I heard the sounds of a vehicle coming along at a good pace behind me. It slackened, and I, to keep up my character, beat over my umbrella, and walked more slowly.

"Hallo, my good woman! Would you like a lift up the hill?" cried the driver; and my heart leapt up, for it was Laurence's voice.

"Ay, ay!" I grunted out, slowly; and waiting until the cart came up to me, I climbed, with his help, and with seeming difficulty, carefully keeping my cloak over my hands, on to the seat by his side.

"All right!" said he; and again I grunted "Ay, ay!" and on we went.

Oh how happy I felt to be again by his side!

I began to get impatient for him to know me. I looked at him furtively; and presently to my exceeding comfort, he pulled down over his wrists two little uncomfortable woollen cuffs that I had made, and that he had bought of me at the sale.

"Aren't you going to talk?" said I, in my natural voice.

He gave the reins such a jerk that the horse stopped.

"You won't be cross with me again, will you?" said I.

He slipped the reins into his right hand and put his other arm around me, and kissed me, and told me his father was to return by a train which reached Beaconsburgh about ten o'clock, and Laurence was on his way to meet him.

"We will call at Dr. Lowe's first, and then you shall go on with me to the station and see my father," said he.

I protested a little that I ought to go back with the Doctor; but Laurence carried his point.

I remained in the cart holding the reins, for fear my quaint appearance should excite curiosity regarding young Mr. Reade's companion if I got out and went into the station with him. But he stood by my side holding my hand under my cloak while we talked in a low voice.

I've had to be away all to-day over at Lawley, and I have to be there again to-morrow with my father; but in the evening I shall call at the Alders and ask boldly for Miss Christie.

We were so intent upon our conversation that I did not notice there was a man standing very near to us during the last part of it. As Laurence finished speaking he turned his head, and suddenly became aware that the train had come in while we were talking.

"Jewel! Wait for me, darling," he cried hastily, and then dashed off so quickly that he ran against the man, who was dressed like a navvy, and knocked his hat off.

When he returned with his father, who greeted me very kindly, he looked pale and anxious.

"Do you know who that man was I ran against?" he whispered.

"That navvy?"

"It was no navvy. It was Mr. Rayner."

"Laurence!" said I incredulously.

"I tell you it was—I swear it! What was he doing, skulking about in that get-up? He came down by this train. He must have overheard what we were saying. Now mark what I say, Violet—I shall not see you again."

But, Laurence, how could he prevent it? You will come to the house and ask for me—

"Listen, Violet," he interrupted. If you do not see me to-morrow night before seven o'clock, be at your 'nest' without fail at half-past."

"Very well, I will, Laurence—I will. I promise."

"But nothing would reassure him."

"I tell you it will be of no use, my darling—of no use. We must say good-bye to-night, for I shall not see you again."

## CHAPTER XX.

During the whole of the drive back to Geldham it was old Mr. Reade who talked to me, and not Laurence. When we got me down, telling his father to drive on home as he came inside the gate with me.

"Violet," he said, very gravely, "I am afraid I have been foolish in agreeing with my father's wishes, and I am more than anxious about you than I can tell. And now I am tortured with my weakness should be visited on you, child; for I can't even write to you openly, and if I enclose letters to you to my dear old blundering dad, you will certainly never get them."

"Why not send them to Mrs. Manners, Laurence?"

He caught at the suggestion eagerly.

"That is a capital idea, my darling! I'll go to her before breakfast to-morrow morning and ask her to look after you as vember I shall be back in England. By the third week in November I shall stay; but to-morrow night I will bring you an address that you can always write to. Now, if anything happens to you, or you are ill, or anything, you are to write at once, and I will return to Geldham without delay. And, my darling—"

We were interrupted by the sound of Dr. Lowe's brougham, and he told me that Haldee was suffering at present only from a bad feverish cold, but that it might turn to something worse.

and he should call again to see her in the morning; and he then told the coachman to drive on.

Laurence flung his arms round me.

"Now listen, my darling. Don't trust anybody while I am away, and don't believe what anybody may tell you about me. And, if you get no letters, and they tell you I am dead—"

"Oh, Laurence, don't!"

"Why, that will be a life! I shall be alive and single all the next six weeks, and at the end of that time I shall come back and marry you; and, if you want me, I shall come back before, my own darling! Good-bye, good-bye!"

I stopped for a moment, and clung to a birch-tree for support while I dried my eyes before presenting myself at the front door.

But, just as I was going to leave the shelter of the trees, I saw in the gloom a figure making its way across the lawn toward the back of the house. I could only see that it was a man, and that he was carrying what looked like a small trunk; and it seemed heavy.

Who could it be at this time of night? Was it Tom Parks paying a late visit to Sarah, knowing the master was away? I waited, trembling, and in a few minutes had the satisfaction of seeing him reappear, followed by Sarah. And the cloud having passed over the face of the moon, I saw that it was indeed Tom Parks.

They disappeared up the stable path, and I took the opportunity to dart across the gravel-space to the front door and ring as gently as I could. Jane came down in a few minutes, very sleepy, and let me in.

I told her to go to bed as fast as she could; and when I had seen her into the nursery, I went softly to the head of the kitchen stairs. The side-door by which Sarah and Mr. Rayner used to go to and from the stables was ajar, and just inside was a small old brown portmanteau. As I held my candle over my head and peered at it curiously, it struck me that I had seen it before somewhere. Then I turned and fled guiltily up-stairs to my room. Haldee was sleeping, and looked somewhat feverish then when I went away. I was very tired, and the moment I laid my head on my pillow I fell soundly asleep, and did not wake until the morning.

Haldee was already awake, and undoubtedly better.

"How did you sleep, darling?" said I, sitting on the bed and kissing her.

"Oh, beautifully, Miss Christie! I hardly ever woke up once; I should like to be up here always. I think I should have nice dreams up here, not like the ones I have downstairs."

"You shall stay up here till you are quite well again, darling," said I, inwardly resolving to beg that she might sleep in my room permanently.

I had all my meals by myself that day, except tea, which I had up-stairs with Haldee, for Sarah said Mrs. Rayner was too unwell to leave her room. I sat up-stairs by my pupil's bedside, in high spirits at the thought of Laurence's expected visit. At last I heard the front-door bell ring, and, after a few minutes' breathless waiting, I ran down-stairs.

"Who was that, Sarah?" asked I.

"Only one of Gregson's boys asking for Mr. Rayner, miss. Strange that Gregson's boys should come to the front door, I thought. It was half-past six, and at half-past seven I was to be at my 'nest.' If Laurence had not come before, when the hands of the schoolroom clock pointed to twenty minutes past, I dashed into the garden, through the plantation toward my 'nest.'"

Laurence was not there! And, as I stood wondering, I heard the church-clock strike eight. A bit of paper half hidden in the grass caught my eye. On it was scrawled in pencil, in Laurence's hand-writing—

"Good-bye, my darling! Remember what I prophesied last night: called at the Alders at seven, and was told by Sarah that you were tired out with watching by Haldee, and were asleep. I come here to-night, and you are not here. I know it is a trick, and I know who is at the bottom of it. When I left you last night, there were two men in a cart outside the stable-gate of the Alders. If anything happens, write to me at the following address—"

Then followed the address, and the scrawl ended with—"I have spoken to Mrs. Manners. Good-bye, my darling! Your devotedly loving, 'LAURENCE.'"

I kissed the note, thrust it into the front of my frock, and fled into the house and into the schoolroom. Sarah was just turning away from the mantel-piece; and by the clock it was just four minutes past eight.

## CHAPTER XXI.

Sarah must have put the schoolroom clock back. I had found her just now turning from the mantel-piece, and I could not doubt that, her object being gained, she had been putting the clock right again. This malicious persecution had been going on for some time, and you are not here. I know it is a trick, and I know who is at the bottom of it. When I left you last night, there were two men in a cart outside the stable-gate of the Alders. If anything happens, write to me at the following address—"

Then followed the address, and the scrawl ended with—"I have spoken to Mrs. Manners. Good-bye, my darling! Your devotedly loving, 'LAURENCE.'"

I kissed the note, thrust it into the front of my frock, and fled into the house and into the schoolroom. Sarah was just turning away from the mantel-piece; and by the clock it was just four minutes past eight.

As I looked up after reading this out to her, I saw that her face had turned quite livid; the old hatred of me gleamed in her eyes, and I wished Mr. Rayner had written to her himself, instead of making me deliver a message which appeared so distasteful to her.

She said, "Very well, miss;" and I wondered what work it was.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. There were scarcely any flowers left now, but by wandering into remote nooks of the garden, I managed to collect enough for a very fair October bouquet. I took them into the house, when I saw there was a gentleman standing at the window, looking out into the garden. It was Mr. Carruthers.

"No; I told me you were out."

"You are looking very well. I am afraid," said he, still holding my hand, "you have not been missing any of us much."

"Well, you see I had known the people there only two days," said I, seriously.

"The people there? As if I cared how little you missed 'the people there!' When I say you have not been missing any of us, I mean you have not been missing me."

"But I haven't known you longer than the others," said I, smiling.

"Well, don't you want to know what has been going on at Denham Court?" he asked rather suddenly, in a different tone.

"Oh, yes! But there has not been time for much to happen."

There has been time for a very serious misfortune to happen. Last night Denham Court was broken into, and Lady Mills and Mrs. Cunningham and Mrs. Carew and some of the other ladies had all their most valuable jewelry stolen; and a quantity of gold plate was taken too. It was Lady Mills' maid who first gave the alarm by a cry at sight of the open window when she went into the dressing-room this morning, after calling her mistress. Lady Mills ran in; they looked out together, and saw the ladder lying underneath. The dressing-room has been unlocked and left open by the thief, to pass into the house.

But, at first sight, nothing seemed to have been disturbed. The dressing-case was locked and in its place; a strong tin case still in the locked-up wardrobe. But, on moving it, they found that the lock had been burst open, and it was entirely empty. Jewels, cases and all, had disappeared. By this time the head-right, but that he had gone to the tool-house in the morning with one of the under-gardeners, a man named Parkes—

[TO BE CONTINUED.]