

## IN GOLDEN BONDS.

## CHAPTER XXV.—CONTINUED.

"Caught? Not in the least likely," answered Mr. Rayner decisively. "Why should they be? They might be if they had their equals in wits pitted against them; but they haven't. The ordinary detective has the common defect of vulgar minds, want of resources. The chief, if he is clever enough to be a successful jewel robber, has the abilities of a general. The holder be it, the more certain he is of success. The detective, in spite of repeated failures, believes himself infallible. If I was a thief, I should commit robberies as nearly as possible under the detective's nose. That attitude being never suspect the man who braved him to his face."

"Ah, it's very fine to talk," said one acute villager, who thought Mr. Rayner was really going too far: "but, when it came to the detective being there, you'd be as bold as the rest of us, I'm thinking."

Mr. Rayner laughed good-humouredly enough, and said perhaps he was right; and I heard the acute villager bragging of having put down Mr. Rayner, who, he said, was a bit bumptious for just a gentleman-fiddler, and wasn't so much cleverer than the rest of 'em he guessed, for all his talk.

At dinner Mr. Rayner tried again to induce his wife to go to Monaco, and encouraged me to join my persuasions to his, which I did most heartily. But to all we said she only replied steadily and coldly that she disliked travelling, did not feel well enough to undertake a journey, and preferred remaining at the Alders. She added, in the same parrot-like tone, that she thought the change would do me and Haidee good, and that it was very kind of my mother to go.

After dinner I ran up stairs to my room, and opening the door softly, found Haidee dying by the fire. So I sat down to write my scarcely begun letter to Laurence.

I first told him how happy his letter had made me, and then, obeying his injunction to tell him everything that happened at the Alders, I gave him a full account how Sarah had prevented our meeting on Wednesday evening, and of her stealing my letter out of the bag on Thursday, of Mr. Caruther's visit to tell me about the robbery at Denham Court, of the accident to Sarah on Friday night, of her ravings about a bad man named James Woodfall, of Mr. Rayner's return, and of his intentions to take Haidee, my mother, and me to Monaco in a few days.

The hope of seeing Laurence again soon had by this time swallowed up every other thought concerning the journey; and I was eager for Friday to come, that we might start.

Then I told him I had some very grave suspicions about the robbery, that I had told Mr. Rayner, who did not think so seriously of them as I did, but that he said I ought not to repeat them to anybody until he had thoroughly sifted the matter, and I had promised not to do so.

"So now you are not to be anxious about my safety any more, my dearest Laurence. For Sarah, the only person who wished me harm, is too ill to move, and is in danger, poor woman, of losing, if not her life, at least her reason, the Doctor says. And Mr. Rayner has promised not to go away again for more than a day at a time, either on business or for pleasure. There seems a curious fatality about his absences, for both these dreadful robberies that have frightened everybody so much lately, the one at Lord Dalton's, and the one at Denham Court, have happened while he was away, with no man in the house to protect us against burglars or our fears of them. I think your prejudice against Mr. Rayner ought to break down now that through him we are to meet each other so soon; for when we are at Monaco you will come over and see us, won't you? My mother is very anxious to make your acquaintance, though she does not know of our engagement, for I dare not tell her any secrets. I think Mr. Rayner must have guessed it though, for he says little things to tease me and make me blush. And you see he does not try to prejudice me against you, as you thought he would. But he might try, and everybody in the world might try, for years and years, but they would never succeed in changing the heart of your own over-loving

"VIOLET."

I had said at dinner that day, in answer

to Mr. Rayner's inquiries, that I was not going to afternoon service, but I had not mentioned that I was going to the Vicarage. I felt sure that I should blush if I did, and then Mr. Rayner would guess my visit had something to do with Laurence; and I did not want to be teased any more. So, when five o'clock came, and I knew that service must be over, I put on my outdoor things, kissed Haidee, who was now awake, and slipped softly down-stairs and out by the schoolroom window. I was not afraid of leaving that unfastened, now that Mr. Rayner had come back again.

Mrs. Manners met me in the hall of the Vicarage, took me into the drawing-room, and gave me a packet of tracts, two or three of which had names slightly pencilled on them, as specially suitable to certain of the parishioners, as, "The Drunkard's Warning"—Mrs. Nabbitts; "The Cost of a Ribbon"—Lizzie Mojer. There I was to deliver to Miss Maud Reade for distribution in her district this week.

"Tell her to notice that I have marked some specially," said Mrs. Manners, as she gave them to me; and I rather wondered how the persons they were directed to would take the attention.

I thought that, in spite of her hatred of subterfuge, Mrs. Manners seemed to enjoy the little mystery which hung over my engagement. She kissed me very kindly as she sent me off, and told me I was to let her know when Sarah was well enough to be read to, and she would send something to be read which might do her good. I promised that I would; but I hope it was not impious of me to think, as I could not help thinking, that she was too wicked for any of Mrs. Manners's good books to have much effect upon her.

I went through the side-gate of the Vicarage garden, where I had run against Laurence on that happy evening which seemed so long ago, although in truth only eight days had passed since then, and my heart beat fast, and I walked slowly, for I remembered to me that Laurence must be coming round the corner again to meet me; but of course he did not; and I quickened my pace as I crossed the park to the Hall.

The mist was growing very thick, although it was only a little past five; and I knew I must make haste back, or I might risk losing my way, short as the distance was between the Hall and the Alders.

I rang the bell, and asked for Miss Maud Reade; and the servant who opened the door, and who, I felt sure, was the Williamson who was afraid of the blunderbuss, showed me into the drawing-room. There was no one there, for they were all at tea.

This was my first entrance into Laurence's home; and I was so much agitated between pleasure at being in the house he lived in, and shame at feeling that by some of the inhabitants at least, if they knew all, I should be looked upon as an unwelcome intruder, that I sank into a chair and buried my face in my hands. It was a very comforting thought, though, that I was sitting on a chair that Laurence must certainly have sat upon; and then I wondered which was his favorite, and tried one that I thought likely, to see if any instinct would tell me if I were right. I had not made up my mind on that point when the door opened and Miss Maud Reade came in.

She was a girl of about sixteen, with a weak but not disagreeable face; and she shook hands with me rather timidly, but not unkindly.

"Mrs. Manners asked me to bring you these few tracts for your district, Miss Reade. She has marked some for people she thinks them specially suitable for," said I, giving her the packet.

"Thank you; it is very kind of you to take so much trouble," said she.

"Oh, it is no trouble at all!" I answered.

There was a pause or rather awkward constraint; and then I said in a whisper—

"Laurence—your brother—told me to come and see you, and to ask you to put a letter from me to him inside yours. He said I was to tell you to remember your promise, and he would remember his; he underlined that."

Miss Reade's constraint broke up at once, and she grew as much excited and mysterious as I.

"Did he? Then he hasn't forgotten!" she said, in a hissing whisper. "I suppose you know what it is; it's about getting Mr. Reynolds to come here next winter. Oh, do keep him up to it. I'll do anything in the world for you—that won't get me into

trouble with mamma or Alice—if you will!"

"I will. I'll remind him again in my next letter—or when I see him. I'll say, 'Don't forget to invite Mr. Reynolds in the winter.' Will that do?"

"Oh, yes, that will do beautifully! But it is a long time to wait," sighed the girl.

I thought she was much too young to be in love, when she was still in short frocks, and wore her hair in a pigtail; but I was obliged to help her, in return for the service I wanted her to do me.

"I have brought my letter," said I mysteriously. "Shall you be writing soon?"

"I have a letter ready now, and I will put yours inside and give it to a gentleman who is here, and who is going back to London directly after tea, and I will ask him to post it at once."

"Oh, thank you!" said I; and tremblingly, with a fear lest the dreaded Alice should get hold of it, I put my letter into her hands, and soon afterwards I left the house.

The fog was already so much thicker that I wondered whether the gentleman with our letter would be able to find his way back to London that night, and even whether I could find mine back to the Alders. I must be sure to keep to the drive in crossing the park. But, before I got to that, I lost myself among the garden paths, and walked into a flower-bed; and I began to think I should have to find my way back to the door and ask ignominiously to be led to the gate, when I heard voices on my left; and I made my way recklessly in their direction across grass, flower-heds, and everything. I could not see the speakers yet, for there was a hedge or something between us; but I could distinguish that they were the voices of a young man and a young woman of the lower class. Thinking one of them at least must be a servant at the Hall, and able to direct me, I was just going to speak through the hedge, when a few words in the man's voice stopped me.

"I have had enough of you Norfolk girls; you are too stand off for me."

It was the voice of Tom Parkes.

"Yes, to such weather-cocks as you," answered the girl with rough coquetry. "Why, you were keeping company with that ugly Sarah at Mr. Rayner's; and, now that she is ill, you want to take up with me. Oh, a fine sweetheart you'd make!"

But she was not so obdurate as these words promised. It seemed to me, with my suspicious concerning Tom already strong, that in the talk which followed he managed with very little difficulty to find out a good deal about the ways of the household, and also that he spoke as if he had learnt from her a good deal already. Presently I heard the sound of a kiss, and he promised to come and see her again on Wednesday; and then went away; while I, seized by a sudden inspiration, found my way not to the park, but back to the house, which was less difficult.

I asked for Miss Maud Reade again; and this time she rushed out of the drawing-room and met me in the hall as soon as I was announced, and whispered—

"They are all in there. Come into the library."

"May I have my letter back, just to put in something I have forgotten?" said I.

"Oh, yes; here it is!"—and she drew it from her pocket. "Write it here. I will give you a pen. Why, how white you look! Has anything happened?"

"Oh, no, no, nothing, thank you!"

I wrote on a half sheet of paper, which I carefully folded inside my letter, these words:—

"A man who was at Denham Court, and about whom I have strong suspicions, is hanging about the Hall now. He is coming here again on Wednesday night."

I put my letter into a fresh envelope, and put the torn one into my pocket that it might not be seen about; then I begged Miss Reade earnestly to send the letter off at once, as there was something in it of the utmost importance; and she whispered again, "Remember—Mr. Reynolds in the winter!" and, having this time got Williamson to show me as far as the beginning of the drive across the park, I made my way in safety, but slowly, and with much difficulty, back to the Alders.

I slipped through the schoolroom window, which I had left unfastened; and, as soon as I was inside, I heard Mr. Rayner's study door open, and his voice and that of Tom Parkes in the passage leading from the hall. Mr. Rayner was speaking in his usual kind

and friendly way to him, and I thought to myself that it would be useless for me to tell him what I had just heard, which, after all, was nothing in itself, and only became important in connection with the suspicions I had already of the man—a suspicion which Mr. Rayner himself refused to share. And, whoa! Tom Parkes had said, "Well, good night, sir," and gone in the direction of two servants' hall, and Mr. Rayner had returned to his study. I ran up-stairs and prepared for tea, at which meal I felt rather guilty, but said nothing of my expedition or its results.

That evening Mr. Rayner kept me in the drawing room accompanying his violin, and talking, until Mr. Rayner had gone up to the room she now used on the upper floor. He described to me the beauties of the Mediterranean shore, and said that I should be happier there than I had ever been in my life—which I could easily believe when I thought how near I should be to Laurence. He asked me if I was not anxious to see the pretty dresses my mother had been commissioned to get for me, and told me I should look like a little princess if I were good and did just what I was told.

"There is no fear of my not doing that, Mr. Rayner," said I smiling. "But you must not give me too handsome dresses, or I shall not feel at home in them."

"You will soon get used to them," he said with a curiously sharp smile. "There is nothing that women get used to sooner than fine clothes and beautiful jewels, and pretty idleness and—kiss!"

Certainly I liked Laurence's kisses; but the tone in which Mr. Rayner said this grated upon me, and brought the hot blood to my cheeks uncomfortably. He saw the effect his words had upon me, and he jumped up and came towards me where I was standing ready to light my candle.

"You look hurt, my child, but you have no reason for it. Don't you know that all these things are the lawful right of pretty women?"

"Then it is a right a good many of them are kept out of all their lives, Mr. Rayner," said I smiling.

"Only the silly ones," he returned in a tone I did not understand. "Well, I will explain to you on our journey to Monaco."

He looked very much excited, as he often did after an evening spent with his violin; and his blue eyes, in which one seemed to see the very soul of music, flashed and sparkled as he held my hand.

"Don't be surprised at what I have said to you this evening. You have brought me luck, and you shall share it. This journey shall take you to the arms of a lover who will give you all the things I spoke of and more—a thousand times more!"

That was true indeed, I thought to myself, (but did he mean what I meant?) as I tore myself, laughing and blushing, away and ran up-stairs. There was more delight in the mere fact that Laurence referred me to any other woman in the world than in all the beautiful gowns and jewels that ever princesses wore. And I went to sleep that night with my hands under my pillow clasp ing his letter.

Haidee left my room next day for the first time, and spent the afternoon by the dining-room fire. So after dinner Mr. Rayner came in with his riding boots on, and asked with a smile if I had not a letter to send to the post. He was going to ride to Beaconsburg, and, if I gave it to him, it would go a post earlier than if I put it into the bag for the postman to fetch.

"No, I have no letter, thank you, Mr. Rayner," said I, with a blush.

"Not a line for—Nice, to tell—some one you are coming?" said he archly.

"No," answered I, shaking my head.

"You posted that one yesterday yourself, didn't you, Miss Christie?" whispered little Haidee, putting her arms round my neck.

Mr. Rayner heard the whisper.

"Yesterday," asked he quickly.

"I—I gave—a note to Miss Reade to put with hers," said I.

A curious change passed over Mr. Rayner. The smile remained on his face, which had, however, in one second turned ashy white. He said, "All right, my dear," in his usual voice, except that I fancied there was a sort of hardening in it, and left the room.

"Was it naughty of me to say?" said Haidee, feeling that something was wrong.

"Oh, no, my darling!" I answered.

I too was afraid I had displeased Mr. Rayner by going to the Hall, without saying anything about it to any one, in nat