



## THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

A Romance.

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.

(Continued from page 17.)

He was trying to pique me; but I only laughed and pointed out to him that he had had a visitor on the evening when he was to have tried my skill, but that I was quite ready to stumble through any music he liked whenever he pleased, if it were not too difficult.

So after tea Mr. Rayner got out his violin, and I sat down to the piano; and we played some of the old operas that have delighted Europe for years.

Dr. Matland came in while we were playing.

He was our nearest neighbor, and he often came in the evening to play chess with Mr. Rayner, who always beat him. He listened to the music with great astonishment and some pleasure for a long time, until he learnt that I was reading at sight, and that I had accompanied Mr. Rayner only once before. Then he almost gasped.

"Good gracious! I should never have believed it. You seem to have the same soul!" he cried, awe-struck.

Mr. Rayner gave me a strange smile as the doctor uttered his quaint speech, and I laughed back, much amused at the effect of our efforts on a musically ignorant listener. When Mr. Rayner was putting his violin into its case, he suddenly discovered that a corner of the latter was damp.

"This will never do," he exclaimed. "I might as well keep it in the garden as in this den. Here, Sarah," he added, turning toward the table where she had just placed the candles. "Take this to my room—mind, very carefully."

So his room could not be damp, I thought, or he would not allow his precious violin to be taken there. I had said good-night, and was in the hall, just in time to see Sarah, carrying the violin, disappear down the passage, on the right-hand side of the staircase, which led to the study. Now the wing where Mrs. Rayner's room was on the left-hand side of the staircase. When I got to the foot of my turret staircase, which was only a few steps from the head of the back staircase that the servants used, I heard Sarah's quick tread in the passage below, and, putting down my candle on the ground, I went softly to the top of the stairs and looked down. I saw Sarah, much to my amusement, give a vicious shake to the violin-case, as if it were a thing she hated; and then I saw her take a key from her pocket and unlock a door near the foot of the stairs. Sarah took out the key, went through, and locked it behind her; I saw that it led, not into a room at all, but into the garden.

So far, then, Mr. Reade's guess was right. But there still remained the question—Where did Mr. Rayner sleep?

## CHAPTER X.

The day after the violin-playing was very wet, and, looking out of the window during lessons with Haidee, I caught sight of her small sister trotting along composedly without a hat in the fast-falling rain. I jumped up and called to her; but she took no notice; so I ran to fetch my umbrella, and set off in pursuit. After a little while I saw her steadily tottling up a side-path among the trees which led to the stables; and I followed softly without calling her again, as, if irritated by perspiration, she might, I knew, plunge among the trees and surrender only when we were both wet through.

The stables were built much higher up than the house, close to the road, but surrounded by trees. I had never been near them before; but now I followed Haidee, close underneath the walls, where she began dancing about by herself, making hideous grimaces at two windows on the upper story, and throwing up at them little stones and bits of stick that she picked up, all wet and muddy, from the moist earth. I seized and caught her up in my arms so suddenly that for the first few moments she was too much surprised to howl; but I had scarcely turned to take her back to the house when she recovered her powers completely, and made the plantation ring with a most elfish yell. I spoke to her and tried to reason with her, when one of the upper windows was thrown open, and Mr. Rayner appeared at it.

"Hallo, what is the matter? Kidnapping, Miss Christie?"

"Oh, Mr. Rayner, she will sit in the mud and open her mouth to catch the rain without a hat, and it can't be good for her!" I said, pitiously.

"Never mind. It doesn't seem to hurt her. I believe she is half a frog," said her father, with less tenderness than he might have shown, I thought.

"But you will get your own feet wet, my dear child," said he, in quite a different tone. "Come up here and sit by the fire, while I fetch your goloshes. You have never seen my studio. I pass half my time painting and smoking and smoking, and I can't get out." He had a palette on his thumb and a pipe in his mouth while he spoke. "You don't mind the smell of turpentine or tobacco, do you?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Rayner! But I won't come in, thank you. I am at lessons with Haidee," said I.

"Happy Haidee! I wish I were young enough to take lessons; and yet if I were, I shouldn't be old enough to make the best use of my time," said he, in a low voice, with mock-modesty that made me laugh.

He was leaning a long way out of the window in the rain, and I had work to do indoors; so, without saying anything more, I returned to the house with my prize.

It was to his studio then that Sarah had taken his violin. Could this be where Mr. Rayner slept? No; for in that case he would hardly have asked me to come up and look at his painting. Yet I should have liked, in the face of Mr. Reade's tire-some suspicions, to be sure.

On the following night there was a high wind, which made the door which stood always fastened back at the top of the kitchen-stairs rattle and creak on its hinges. At last I could bear this last sound no longer. I had been sitting up late over a book, and I knew that the household must be asleep, so I slipped down stairs as softly as I could. I had got to the top of the back-staircase, when I saw a faint glimmer of light coming along the passage below. I drew back quickly, so quickly that my candle went out; and then I waited, with my heart beating fast, not so much to see who it was, as because I did not dare to move. The faint light came along swiftly, and when close to the foot of the stairs below me, I could see that it was a shaded lantern, and could just distinguish the form of a man carrying it. Was he coming up-stairs? For the next few moments I scarcely dared to breathe, and I could almost have given a cry of joy when, by some movement of the head, I recognized Mr. Rayner. He did not see me; he put the key in the lock, turned it, took the key out, went through and locked it after him so quickly and so entirely without noise that a moment afterwards I could almost have thought that I had imagined the whole scene. It had been so utterly without sound that, if my eyes had been closed, I should have known nothing about it. I went back to my room again, not only profoundly sorry that Mr. Reade's surmise was correct—for I could no longer doubt that Mr. Rayner did sleep over the stables—but impressed with an eerie dread of the man who could move about in the night as noiselessly and swiftly as a spirit.

When I awoke, however, in the fresh morning, all unpleasant impressions of the night before had faded away; and, when Mr. Rayner brought into the drawing-room after dinner a portfolio full of his sketches and panels, I felt that it was not for me to judge his actions, and that there must be some good motive that I did not know for his sleeping far out of the damp, as for everything else that he did. He proposed to paint me, and I gave him a sitting that very afternoon in the dining-room, and he said that he must finish it next day in his studio, and, when I objected to neglect my lessons again, he said the whole family should emigrate thither for the morning, and then perhaps I should be satisfied.

So the next day at eleven o'clock he came into the school-room with Mrs. Rayner, who wore her usual air of being drawn into this against what will she had, and we all four crossed the garden to the stables, and went up through the harness-room to the big room over the coach-house, which looked even more comfortable than I had expected.

For the floor was polished, and there were two beautiful rugs. At one end of the room was a partition, and behind this partition I guessed that Mr. Rayner slept. There was a bright fire burning in the tiled fireplace, and there were soft easy-chairs, rather worn by constant use, but very comfortable, and there were pictures on the walls, and there was a dark carved-oak cabinet full of curious and beautiful things, and a writing-table; and lastly there were the easel and a great profusion of portfolios and half-finished sketches and studies. Altogether the room contrasted very favorably with the moldy-looking drawing-room. Perhaps Mrs. Rayner thought so as she sat down, with one eager intent look round the room, as if she had never seen it before; and then without any remark she took out her knitting and worked silently, while I posed again as I had done on the previous day, with my head on one side, and my hands, as Mr. Rayner had placed them, clasped under my chin, while he painted and talked.

After two hours' work, Mr. Rayner called us to look at his sketch, which represented a very lovely girl with dark eyes a little larger than mine, a red-lipped mouth a little smaller, teeth a little whiter, and a complexion a little creamier in the white parts and a little rosier in the red; and the brown hair coiled on the top was just a little glossier and smoother than mine ever was. It was just a little like me all the same; and I was rather hurt when Mrs. Rayner summoned spirit enough to say that he had flattered me, although I knew it quite well. But Mr. Rayner said gravely that it was impossible for a portrait to flatter a handsome woman, and Mrs. Rayner raised her thin shoulders in a slight shrug and turned to leave the room. Haidee rose to follow her, but paused on the threshold to look around for me.

"You are an excellent model, you sit so still. What shall I give you as a reward for remaining so long without blinking or yawning as all professional models do?"

"Nothing, Mr. Rayner; I like having it done. It flatters one's vanity to be painted; and flattery is always reward enough for a woman, they say," said I, laughing and following Haidee to the door.

"I shall find something more substantial than that," said Mr. Rayner, in a low voice, as if half to himself, looking up with a kind smile as I left the room. That afternoon Haidee had just run out of the schoolroom at the conclusion of her lessons, when Mr. Rayner came in. He held in his hand an old and shabby little case.

"Now see what you have earned by sitting still."

He drew me to the window and opened the case, keeping his eyes fixed upon my face as he did so. There was a large pendant in the shape of a heart, which was a blaze of what seemed to me the most magnificent diamonds I had ever seen. The sight of them inspired me not with pleasure, but terror. I drew a long breath of surprise and admiration.

"It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," said I at last.

"You like diamonds?" said he, in a low voice.

I looked up and laughed, rather an effort.

"Oh, no! I shouldn't care for diamonds for myself, I should look absurd in them. Diamonds are for great ladies, not for governesses."

"Well, without being a great lady, a governess may wear an ornament she has fairly earned, may she not?"

"Yes," said I, trying to keep up a light tone of talk, though my heart was beating fast.

"And so you can accept this pretty little thing as the reward of your services to a grateful painter and a souvenir of our pleasant morning all together in the studio."

"Oh, no—oh, no—I can't indeed! Don't be angry with me, Mr. Rayner; but the very thought of possessing anything so valuable would be a burden to me night and day."

Mr. Rayner burst out a long laugh. "This pendant, the enormous value of which frightens you so much, is worth about fifteen shillings. It has a value in my eyes, but for a different reason. Look here."

He turned it over, and I saw on the back a monogram, and the date 1792.

"What are the letters of the monogram?"

I read,—"R. G. D."

"G. D. R.," corrected he—"Gervase D. Rayner—my own initials and those of my father and grandfather before me. In full family conclave at tea, you shall hear me announce the presentation, and then you will be satisfied, won't you, you modest little girl?"

"But I can never wear such a thing as this, if it is only what you call paste," I objected.

"Wear it under your dress, and then the blaze of it will dazzle nobody," said Mr. Rayner, bending over me and laughing kindly at my reluctance.

So I took it with most ungracious feelings, which I tried to hide, and thanked him as well as I could. True to his promise, Mr. Rayner said to his wife at tea-time:

"I have with the greatest difficulty prevailed upon this proud Miss Christie of ours to accept as a reward for her services as model a twopenny-halfpenny trinket, which she almost told me was not fit to wear."

"Oh, Mr. Rayner!"

He was putting such a different color upon my reluctance, as if I had not thought it good enough. And there is a great deal of difference between fifteen shillings and twopenny-halfpenny. I saw Sarah, who was in the room, look at me very sharply, as if she thought governesses had no business to wear trinkets at all; and Mrs. Rayner did not look pleased.

When I got up-stairs, I sat down in the arm-chair which had its back to the door, took the case out of my pocket, and looked at the ornament. It certainly was very splendid, and I thought, as I looked at it, that it was great waste of money to buy real diamonds, which cost so much more and looked no better. And, as I was holding it up to the light and feeling at last a thrill of pleasure in its possession, I heard a voice behind me say—

"So that's the twopenny-halfpenny trinket, is it?"

Of course it was Sarah. She had come up to bring me some water, and I had plenty in the jug. I shut up the case, and said coldly—

"Of course Mr. Rayner would not give any one a thing which really cost only twopenny-halfpenny, Sarah."

"No, miss, not for such services as yours."

And she said it in such a nasty tone that, when she had left the room, I threw the case down upon the table and burst into tears.

## CHAPTER XI.

The school-treat which had been put off this year, first on account of sickness in the village, and then because of the wet weather, was now fixed to take place on Saturday; and the following day was to be the harvest festival. The Misses Reade had undertaken most of the decoration of the church, as the Vicar's wife had enough to do in preparing for the school-feast and accompanying sale.

The next day Haidee and I took a longer walk than usual; and, when we returned, Jane met me with a mysterious air in the hall.

"Oh, Miss Christie, young Mr. Reade called while you was out, and asked to see you! He said he had a message for you. So he wrote a note for you; and please it, wasn't my fault, but Sarah got hold of it, and she took it to Mr. Rayner. I told her it was directed to you; but she wouldn't take no notice."

I went up-stairs very much annoyed by this fresh indignity offered me by that hateful Sarah, and hurt and sorry besides, for I was longing to know what the note said. As soon as I got into the dining-room, however, Mr. Rayner came up to me smiling, and put it into my hands.

"Here is a  *billet doux*  which has been left for you, Miss Christie. Now whom do you expect one from?"

"From nobody, Mr. Rayner," said I, blushing very much.

This was not a story, because I knew the letter could not be at all the sort of communication he implied, but would contain, probably, some formal message from Mrs. Matland.

I opened it at once to show that I did not think it of any consequence. It only said—

"DEAR MISS CHRISTIE.—My sisters find there is so much to be done for the church that they are afraid they won't be able to do it all. Would you be so very kind as to undertake part? If you would not mind, I will ride over with the work to-morrow after luncheon, about a quarter-past two."

Yours sincerely, LAURENCE READE.

I think I was a little disappointed in the note; but it was all the better, as I could repeat in quite a careless way what it said; and then, just as I was wondering whether I should tear it up to show that I did not care, I saw that there was something written on the inside leaf, and I put it back into the envelope as if I did not notice what I was doing, and slipped it into my pocket.

Dinner was long that day; when it was over, I went into the school-room and drew out my letter again. The words on the inside leaf were:

"Why were you so unkind on Sunday?"

I had no way of sending back an answer; I could only wait till next day at a quarter-past two.

I had not thought it necessary to mention to Mr. Rayner the time at which Mr. Reade had said he should bring the work; as a quarter-past two we were always in the drawing-room together. But the next day, Mrs. Rayner asked me, directly after dinner, if I would mind writing some letters for her, to go by that afternoon's post. I should have sat down to write them in the drawing-room, but Mrs. Rayner said—

"You would like to be undisturbed, I know. Shall I send your coffee to your room or to the school-room?"

I said, "I beg your pardon, if you please," and went up-stairs trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

I had got through one stupid letter—they were not at all important—when there was a knock at the door, and Jane came in, giggling and excited.

"Oh, miss, I've brought you a parcel, and I have made Sarah so wild!"—and she laughed delightedly.

"I answered the bell, and there was Mr. Reade on his horse with this; and he said, 'Take it to the schoolroom, please; it's for Miss Christie'; and then he got off, and I showed him into the drawing-room. And I saw you wasn't in there, nor yet in the school-room. So when I got into the hall, thinks I, 'I'll be beforehand with old Sally this time! When she comes out and says, 'Give that to me, I'll give it to Miss Christie.' Never mind, says I, half-way up the stairs, 'I don't see you trouble.' And she says to me, 'Just one more, but I was too quick for her, and up I run; and here it is, miss.'"

And she slapped the parcel down upon the table triumphantly.

"Thank you, Jane," I said quietly. "It is only some work for the church from Miss Reade."

Jane's face fell a little; and then, as if struck by a fresh thought, she giggled again. I cut the string and opened the parcel to prove the truth of my words, and showed her the red flannel and the wheat-ears, which were to be sown on in letters to form a text. But in the middle was another note, and a box wrapped up in paper, both directed to "Miss Christie;" and at sight of these little Jane's delight grew irrepressible again.

"I knew it," she began, but stopped herself and said, "I beg your pardon, miss," and left the room very demurely.

But I heard another burst of merriment as she ran down-stairs. Then I opened the note: it only said—

"DEAR MISS CHRISTIE.—I take the liberty of sending you a few roses from a tree in a sheltered corner where the rain cannot spoil them. I hope they won't smell of cigars; I could not find a better box. I will call to fetch the text, if you will let me know when I can see you."

Yours sincerely, "LAURENCE READE."

The roses were in a cigar-box, and as long as they lasted they never smelt of anything but tobacco; but I began to think that perfume nicer than their own.

I was so happy that evening that I was glad when Mr. Rayner asked me to accompany his violin, and he was so pleased with my help that he begged me to go on with "Just one more," and "Just one more," until long after Mrs. Rayner had gone to her room.

The clock had struck the half-hour after ten, which was quite late for the household at the Alders.

So I shook hands as hastily as I could, took my candle, and ran up-stairs.

## CHAPTER XII.

I slackened my pace when I got to the top of the first flight of stairs, and walked softly through the corridor where the nursery was, for fear of waking Mona, and opened the door of my room.

It was quite a calm night, and I walked in very slowly, yet, as I entered, my candle went out suddenly, as if blown by a gust of wind; and I fancied I heard a slight sound as of a human breath blowing it. I stood for a few moments, frightened, in the middle of the room, and then cautiously made my way in the direction of the mantelpiece, where I kept my match-box. I made a slight noise as I passed my fingers over the different articles there, and, just at the moment that I knocked over a china ornament which fell into the fireplace, above the noise it made as it broke to pieces in the grate I heard a sound behind the screen which stood between the bed and the door, and, turning quickly, I was in time to see a figure come swiftly round it and disappear through the still open door. I could distinguish nothing; nevertheless, suppressing my inclination to scream, I rushed to the door and caught in the air at the figure I could no longer see; but I felt nothing.

Then I crept back into my room, shaking from head to foot, and hardly daring to move for fear of encountering another dim figure. I closed the door behind me, sick with fear lest I should be shutting myself in with more unwelcome visitors, and again searched the mantelpiece for the match-box. My hands trembled so that it was a long time before I could be sure that it was not there; and then I turned and felt my way to the table; and, after moving most of the things on it, I at last satisfied myself that it was not there either. Then I groped my way to one of the windows—I had not thought of that before—drew the curtain and pulled up the blind. The moon gave only a fitful light, being obscured every minute by thin driving clouds, and it only served to make shadows in the room, which were more fearful to me, in my nervous state, than darkness itself.

It was out of the question to undress by such weird moonlight, so I determined to conquer my fears and go down-stairs. There were sure to be some matches in the kitchen, and I reflected that enough moonlight would come in through the shutters to let me see my way without making a noise.

So I groped my way down the back-staircase, got safely to the bottom, turned to my left, and felt for a door. The first opened into a big cupboard, where I felt brooms, which I shut again quickly; the second was locked, but the key was in the door, and I softly turned it. This was indeed the kitchen; I heard on the floor a sound which I knew too well to be the rush of myriads of blackbeetles; and, as I would rather have faced a dozen dim human figures than have felt under my foot the "scrunch" of one blackbeetle, I had to shut that door too as quickly as I had to shut the other.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)