



THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

A Romance.

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.

(Continued from page 483.)

"Mr. Rayner; and Mrs. Rayner, won't she be anxious too?" "Oh, Mrs. Rayner is never anything! At least—I mean," said I, annoyed at having spoken without thinking, "she is so reserved that—"

"That you like Mr. Rayner best?"

"Oh, yes!"

He drew himself up rather coldly.

"So do most ladies, I believe."

"One can't help liking a person who talks and laughs, and is bright and kind, better than one who never speaks, and glides about like a ghost, and looks coldly at you if you speak to her," I burst out, apologetically. "I ought not to talk as if I were ill-treated. I am not at all. If she would only not be quite so cold!"

"Perhaps her own troubles are very heavy and hard to bear."

"Oh, no, they are not!" I replied confidently. "At least, she has a kind husband and a pretty home, and everything she can wish for. And I think it is very selfish of her to give herself up to brooding over the memory of her dead child, instead of trying to please her living husband."

"Her dead child?"

"Yes. She had a boy who died some years ago, and she has never got over it. That is why she is so reserved."

"Oh! How long ago did this boy die?" asked he, in a curiously incredulous tone.

"About five years ago, I think Mr. Rayner said."

"Oh, then it was Mr. Rayner who told you?"

"Yes."

"And Mrs. Rayner has never got over it?"

"No. It seems difficult to believe, doesn't it, that a brilliant woman who wrote books and was so much admired should fade like that into a kind of shadow. I wonder she doesn't write more books to divert her thoughts from brooding over the past."

"Oh, she wrote books! Did she tell you so herself?"

"No—Mr. Rayner."

"Oh! Did Mr. Rayner tell you any more?"

The irony in his tone was now so unmistakable that I hesitated and looked up at him inquiringly.

"I am sure he must have told you that he is a very ill-used man and a very long-suffering husband, and asked you to pity him. Didn't he, Miss Christie? Ah, I see he did! He cried."

I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks; but I was indignant at having to submit to this catechism.

"Mr. Rayner never asks impertinent questions," I said severely.

"Miss Christie," he began nervously, "I am afraid I have offended you. Won't you forgive me for being carried a little too far by my interest in a lady who is away from her friends for the first time and not very happy?"

I could not resist such an appeal as that; I looked up smiling, with tears in my eyes.

"Oh, I am not at all offended! But I should like to know what reason you have for thinking so ill, as you seem to do, of Mr. Rayner."

"Perhaps I am wrong. I really have no proof that he is anything but what he wishes every one to think him—a light-hearted, accomplished man, of idle life and pleasant temper. It is not his fault that, with all his cleverness, his ease of manner is not quite the ease of a gentleman."

I considered for a moment, and then said rather timidly: "Won't you tell me anything more? I want all the knowledge I can get of the people I live among, to guide me in my conduct."

He seemed to debate with himself for a moment; then he said very earnestly:

"Seriously, then, Miss Christie, I would advise you to leave the Alders as soon as you possibly can, even before you have got another engagement. You are in the midst of more dangers than you can possibly know of, more probably than I know of myself, more certainly than I can warn you against."

His voice was very low as he finished, and, while we both sat silent, he with his eyes intently fixed on my face, mine staring out fearfully at the sky, a dark figure suddenly appeared before us, blocking out the light. It was Mr. Rayner.

Mr. Reade and I started guiltily. The new-comer had approached so quietly that we had not heard him; had he heard us?

CHAPTER IV.

In spite of the rain and mud, Mr. Rayner was in the brightest of humors; and his first words dispelled my fear that he might have overheard the warning Mr. Reade had just given me not to stay at the Alders. He caught sight of me first as he came under the roof of the dark shed.

"At last, Miss Christie! It was a happy thought of mine to look for you here. But how in the world did you discover this place of refuge?"

"Hullo, Laurence! Ah, this explains the mystery! You have been playing knight-errant, I see, and I am too late in the field; but I shall carry off the lady after all. My wife noticed that you started without your ulster, Miss Christie, and as soon as service was over, she sent me off with it to meet you."

He helped me on with it, and then I stood between them, silent and rather shy at receiving so much unaccustomed attention, until the rain began to fall less heavily, and we seized the opportunity to escape. We all went as far as the park gates, where Mr. Reade left us.

"Nice young fellow, that," said Mr. Rayner, as soon as the other was out of earshot. "Handsome too, and good-natured. There's not a girl in all the countryside who hasn't a smile and a blush for Laurence."

I did not think this so great a recommendation as it seemed to Mr. Rayner, but I said nothing, and he went on:

"He is worth all the rest of his family put together. Father—self-important, narrow-minded old simpleton; mother—ill-dressed vegetable, kept alive by a sense of her own dignity as the penniless daughter of an earl; sisters—plain, stuck-up nonentities; young brother—dunce at Eton. But they haven't been able to spoil Laurence. He may have a few of their prejudices, but he has none of their narrow-minded pig-headedness. You don't understand the rustic mind yet, Miss Christie. I assure you there are plenty of people in this parish who have condemned me to eternal punishment because I am fond of racing, and, worse than all, play the violin."

"Do you play the violin? Oh, I am so fond of it!"

"Are you? Poor child, you had better not acknowledge the taste as long as you remain in this benighted spot; they class it with the black art. I believe I am popularly supposed to have bewitched the Alders by my playing. Some of the rustics think that the reeds round the pond play all by themselves; about midnight, if they are accidentally touched."

"Oh, Mr. Rayner, aren't you rather hard upon the rustics?" I said, laughing.

"Not a bit, as you will find out soon enough. However, if you are not afraid of being bewitched, too, you shall hear my violin some evening, and give me your opinion of it."

We were within the garden gates by this time, and as we walked down the path, I saw a woman's figure among the trees on our right. The storm had left the evening sky so dark and she was so well hidden that if I had not been very sharp-sighted I should not have noticed her. As it was, I could not recognize her, and could only guess that it was Mrs. Rayner. The idea of those great weird eyes being upon me, watching me, just as they had been on the evening of my arrival, made me uncomfortable. I was glad Mr. Rayner did not look that way, but went on quietly chatting till we reached the house. He left me in the hall, and went straight into his study, while I, before going up-stairs to take off my bonnet, went into our little schoolroom to put my church-service away. The French window had not been closed, and I walked up to it to see whether the rain had come in. The sky was still heavy with rain-clouds, so that it was quite dark indoors, and while I could plainly see the woman I had noticed among the trees forcing her way through the wet branches, stepping over the flower-beds on to the lawn, and making her way to the front of the house, she could not see me. When she came near enough for me to distinguish her figure, I saw that it was not Mrs. Rayner, but Sarah, the housemaid. She was only a few steps from the window where I stood completely hidden by the curtain, when Mr. Rayner passed quickly and caught her arm from behind. She did not turn or cry out, but only stopped short with a sort of gasp.

"What were you doing in the shrubbery just now, Sarah?" he asked, quietly. "If you want to take fresh air in the garden, you must keep to the lawn and the paths. By forcing your way through the trees and walking over the beds you do damage to the flowers—and to yourself. If you cannot remember these simple rules, you will have to look out for another situation."

She turned round sharply.

"Another situation! Me!"

"Yes, you. Though I should be sorry to part with such an old servant, yet one may keep a servant too long."

"Oh! I wasn't always old!" she broke out, passionately.

"Therefore you were not always in receipt of such good wages as you get now. Now go in and get tea ready. And take care the toast is not burnt again."

I could see that she glared at him with her great black eyes like a tigress at bay, but she did not dare to answer again, but slunk away cowed into the house.

The whole scene had puzzled me a little. What did Sarah, the housemaid, want to stand like a spy in the shrubbery for? How had Mr. Rayner seen and recognized her without seeming even to look in that direction? Was there any deeper meaning under the words that had passed between them? There was suppressed passion in the woman's manner which could hardly have been stirred by her master's orders to keep to the garden paths and not to burn the toast; and there was a hard decision in Mr. Rayner's which I had never noticed before, even when he was seriously displeased.

That night I pondered Mr. Reade's warning to me to leave the Alders; but I soon decided that the suggestion was quite impractical. For, what reason could I offer either to my employers or to my mother for wishing to go?

And what a bad recommendation it would be to have left my first situation within a month! And what could I say I did it for? So I decided to pay no attention to vague warnings, but to stay where I was certainly, on the whole, well off.

The next morning I could not help noticing how much better I was looking than when I lived in London. After a minute's pleased contemplation of my altered appearance, I went down-stairs. Mr. Rayner was already in the dining-room, but no one else was there yet. He put down his newspaper and smiled at me.

"Come into the garden for a few minutes until the rest of the family assembles," said he; and I followed him through the French window on to the lawn.

"Looks pretty, doesn't it?" said Mr. Rayner.

"Pretty! It looks and smells like Paradise! I mean—"

I stopped and blushed, afraid that he would think the speech profane.

But he only laughed very pleasantly. When I raised my eyes, he was looking at me and still laughing.

"You are fond of roses?"

"Yes, very, Mr. Rayner."

"But don't you think it was very silly of Beauty to choose only a rose when her father asked what he should bring her?"

"Poor girl, think how hard her punishment was! I don't think if I had married the prince, I could ever have forgotten that he had been a beast, and I should have always been in fear of his changing back again."

"The true story is, you know, that he always remained a beast, but he gave her so many diamonds and beautiful things that she overlooked his ugliness. Now, if you were Beauty, what would you ask papa to bring you? A ring, a bracelet, a brooch?"

"No, Mr. Rayner. I should say a rose, like Beauty—a beautiful Marshal Niel rose. I couldn't think of anything lovelier than that."

"That is a large pale yellow rose, isn't it? I can't get it to grow here."

We had sauntered back to the dining-room window, and there, staring out upon us in a strange fixed way, was Mrs. Rayner. She continued to look at us, and especially at me, as if fascinated, until we were close to the window, when she turned with a start; and when we entered the room she was her usual lifeless self again.

At dinner-time Mr. Rayner did not appear; I was too shy to ask Mrs. Rayner the reason, and I could only guess, when tea-time came again there was no place laid for him, that he had gone away somewhere. I was sure of it when he had not reappeared the next morning, and then I became conscious of a slow but sure change in Mrs. Rayner's manner. Instead of wearing always an unruined stolidity, a faint tinge of color would mount to her white face at the opening of a distant door or at a step in the passage.

On the second day of Mr. Rayner's absence, Sarah came to the schoolroom saying that a gentleman wished to speak to me. In the drawing-room I found Mr. Laurence Reade.

"I have come on business with Mr. Rayner; but as they told me he was out, I ventured to trouble you with a commission for him, Miss Christie. It is only that two of the village boys want to open an account with the penny bank. So I offered to bring the money."

He felt in his pockets and produced one penny.

"I must have lost the other," he said, gravely. "Can you give me change for a threepenny-piece?"

I left him and returned with two halfpennies. He had forgotten the names of the boys, and it was some time before he remembered them. Then I made a formal note of their names and of the amounts, and Mr. Reade examined it and put the date, and then smoothed the paper with the blotting-paper and folded it, making, I thought, an unnecessarily long performance of the whole matter.

"It seems a great deal of fuss to make about twopence, doesn't it?" I asked, innocently.

And Mr. Reade, who was bending over the writing-table, suddenly began to laugh, then checked himself and said:

"One cannot be too particular, even about trifles, where other people's money is concerned."

And I said, "Oh, no! I see," with an uncomfortable feeling that he was making fun of my ignorance of business matters. He talked a little about Sunday, and hoped I had not caught cold; and then he went away.

Nothing happened after that until Saturday, which was the day on which I generally wrote to my mother. After tea, I took my desk up-stairs to my own room; I liked the view of the marsh between the trees, and the sighing of the wind among the poplars. I had not written many lines before another sound overpowered the rustle of the leaves—the faint tones of a violin. At first I could distinguish only a few notes, then Schubert's beautiful "Aufenthalt" rang out clearly and

held me as if enchanted. It must be Mr. Rayner come back. When the last long sighing note of the "Aufenthalt" had died away, I shut up my half-finished letter hastily in my desk and slipped down-stairs with it. The music had begun again. This time it was the "Standchen." I stole softly through the hall, meaning to finish my letter in the schoolroom, where, with the door ajar, I could hear the violin quite well. But as I passed the drawing-room door, Mr. Rayner, without pausing in his playing, cried, "Come in!" I was startled by this, for I had made no noise; but I put my desk down on the hall table and went in. Mrs. Rayner and Haidee were there, the former with a handsome shawl, brought by her husband, on a chair beside her, and my pupil holding a big wax doll, which she was not looking at—the child never cared for her dolls. Mr. Rayner, looking handsomer than ever, said, without stopping the music:

"I have not forgotten you. There is a *souvenir* of your dear London for you," and nodded toward a rough wooden box, nailed down.

I opened it without much difficulty; it was from Covent Garden, and in it, lying among ferns and moss and cotton-wool, were a dozen heavy beautiful Marshal Niel roses. I sat playing with them in an ecstasy of pleasure, until Mr. Rayner put away his violin and I rose to say good-night.

"Lucky Beauty!" he said, laughing, as he opened the door for me. "There is no beast for you to sacrifice yourself to in return for the roses."

I laughed back and left the room, and putting my desk under my flowers, went toward the staircase. Sarah was standing near the foot of it, wearing a very forbidding expression.

"So you're bewitched, too!" she said, with a short laugh, and turned sharply toward the servants' hall.

And I wondered what she meant, and why Mr. and Mrs. Rayner kept in their service such a very rude and disagreeable person.

CHAPTER V.

The next day was Sunday, to which I had already begun to look forward eagerly as a break in the monotonous round of days. Old Mr. Reade was not at church, and his son sat in his place with his back to me. Instead of putting his elbows on his knees through the prayers as he had done on the Sunday before, he would turn right round and kneel in front of his seat, facing me, and I could not raise my eyes for a minute from my book without having my attention distracted in spite of myself.

After service, I heard Mr. Rayner telling the doctor and two of the farmers about the races he had been to the week before, and of his having won fifteen pounds on a horse the name of which I forget; and he took out of his pocket a torn race-card, seeming surprised to find it there, and said it must have been that which had caused his thoughts to wander during the sermon. He asked Mrs. Reade whether her husband was ill, and did not seem at all affected by the cool manner in which she answered his inquiries.

On that afternoon I was scarcely outside the gate on my way to church when he joined me.

"No, no, Miss Christie; we are not going to trust you to go to church by yourself again."

I blushed, feeling a little annoyed, though I scarcely knew why.

"Don't be angry; I spoke only in fun. I want to see Boggett about some fencing, and I know I shall catch him at church. But if you object to my company—"

"Oh, no, Mr. Rayner, of course not!" said I, overwhelmed with terror at the thought of such impertinence being attributed to me.

The heat so distracted my attention that I scarcely heard a word of the sermon. But then it was the curate who preached on that afternoon, and his discourses were never of the exciting kind. I just heard him say that it was his intention to give a course of six sermons, of which this was to be the first; and after that I listened only now and then; and presently I noticed that Mr. Rayner, who always looked more devout than anybody else in church, was really asleep all the time. I thought at first I must be mistaken; but I looked at him twice, and then I was quite sure.

When service was over, he stayed behind to talk to Boggett, while I went on alone. He overtook me in a few minutes; but when he said the sermon was good of his kind, I had to turn away my head that he might not see me smiling. But I was not quick enough for Mr. Rayner.

"I didn't say of what kind, Miss Christie. I may have meant it was good as a lullaby. Are you shocked, Miss Christie?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Rayner!"

"You wouldn't take such a liberty as to be shocked at anything I might do; would you, Miss Christie?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Rayner."

"Where did you pick up a sense of humor, most rare gift of your sex, and why do you hide it away so carefully, Miss Christie?"

"Indeed I don't know; and I don't mean to hide anything," I answered rather foolishly.

"And how did you like the sermon?"

"I wasn't listening much, Mr. Rayner."

"Not listening! A religious little girl like you not listening! I'm surprised—I really am."

His manner grew suddenly so grave that I felt called upon to make a sort of profession.

"I'm not really religious," I said hurriedly. I hope some day I shall be better. I do pray for it," I ended, almost in a whisper.

Mr. Rayner took my hand very kindly.

"It will come, child, it will come," he said, gravely and quite paternally. "Go on quietly doing your duty as you do, and the blessing will come in due time."

He said it so simply, without any attempt at preaching, that I felt I looked up to him more naturally than even to a clergyman, being quite sure now that he acquitted me of any intention to be hypocritical. And when, after tea, he played me to accompany his violin on the piano while he played Mozart's Twelfth Mass, the fervor which he put into the beautiful music inspired me with a corresponding exaltation of feeling, such as no sacred music had ever woken in me before.

At the end of the evening Mrs. Rayner wished me good-night and glided softly from the room before I had finished putting the music in order, as Mr. Rayner had asked me to do. When I rose from bending over the canterbury, still flushed with the excitement caused by the music, Mr. Rayner held out his hand with a grave smile.

"You are the best accompanist I have ever met; you catch the spirit of this sacred music perfectly. Good-night, my dear child."

And he bent down to kiss me. But I shrank back slightly, and so evaded him, trying at the same time to make my movement seem unconscious; and, with a smiling "Good-night!" I left the room.

As soon as I had done so my heart sank within me. What had I done? Probably offended Mr. Rayner beyond recall by what must seem to him an absurdly strained piece of prudery. But if Sarah or Mrs. Rayner, neither of whom seemed to like me very much, had suddenly come in and found Mr. Rayner kissing me, she might have mistaken, in a way which would have been very unpleasant for me, the feeling which prompted him to do so. So I comforted myself as well as I could with the thought that, after all, I had done only what was right and prudent; and, if he was offended, well, there was no help for it.

The next morning, to my great relief, his manner was just the same as usual; of course what had caused so much thought and anxiety to the girl of eighteen had seemed but a trifle to the man of three-and-thirty. But at tea he was much pre-occupied, and told Sarah that a gentleman would be coming to see him presently, who was to be shown into the study.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)