

IN GOLDEN BONDS.

CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Reade's cruel and prejudiced accusations against Mr. Rayner had not in the least shaken my faith in the kindness and goodness of the master of the Alders; but I felt anxious to prove to myself that the charges he brought against him were groundless. Mr. Reade's suggestion that he let his family sleep in the damp house while he passed his nights elsewhere, for instance, was absurd in the extreme. Where else could he sleep without any one's knowing anything about it? I often heard his voice and step about the house until quite late; he was always one of the first in the dining-room to our eight o'clock breakfast, and even on the wettest mornings he never looked as if he had been out in the rain.

It often seems to me that, when I have been puzzling myself fruitlessly for a long time over any matter, I find out quite simply by accident what I want to know. Thus, only the day after my talk with Mr. Reade in the shop, I was nursing Haidee, who did not feel inclined to play after lesson-time, when she said—

"Do you ever have horrid dreams, Miss Christie, that frighten you, and then come true?"

"No, darling; dreams are only fancies, you know, and never come true, except just by accident."

I said this because everybody considers it the right answer to give to a child; but I do believe just a little in dreams myself.

She went on gravely—

"But mine do. I'll tell you about one I had two nights ago, if you'll bend your head and let me whisper. I mustn't tell mamma, because she always stops me and says I mustn't speak of what I see; but I can say it to you; you won't tell, will you?"

"No, darling, I won't tell," said I, thinking it kinder to let the child speak out about her fancies, instead of brooding over them, as the tiny little thing was too prone to do.

"You know that day when we took you up to your new room in the turret?"

"Yes, dear," said I.

"Hush! Whisper," cooed she. "Well, that night Jane put me to bed, just as she always does, in my little room, and then I went to sleep just like I always do. And then I dreamt that I heard mamma screaming and crying, and papa speaking—oh, so differently from the way he generally does; it made me frightened in my dream! I thought it was all real, and I tried to get out of bed; but I was too much asleep; and then I didn't dream any more, only when I woke up I remembered it. I didn't tell anybody; and the next night I wondered if I should have the dream again, and I didn't want Jane to go away; and, when I said it was just because I'd had a dream, she said dreams were stuff and nonsense, and she wanted to go and dream at having supper. And then she went away, and I went to sleep. And then I woke up because mamma was crying, and I thought at first it was my dream again; but I knocked my head against the rail of my bed, and then I knew I must be awake. And I got out of bed, and I went quite softly to the door and looked through the keyhole, for there was a light in her room. When she has a light, I can see in quite plainly through the keyhole, and I can see the bed and her lying in it. But she wasn't alone like she generally is—I could see papa's hand holding the candle, and he was talking to her in such a low voice; but she was crying and talking quite wildly and strangely, so that she frightened me. When she talks like that, I feel afraid—it doesn't seem as if she were mamma. And then I saw papa put something on her face, and mamma said, 'Don't—don't! Not that!' and then she only moaned, and then she was quite still, and I heard him go out of the room. And presently I called 'Mamma, mamma!' but she didn't answer; and I was so frightened, I thought she was dead. But then I heard her sigh like she always does in her sleep, and I got into bed again."

"Were you afraid to go in, darling?"

"I couldn't go in, because the door was locked. It always is, you know. I never go into mamma's room; I did only once, and she said—she said—and the child's soft whisper grew softer still, and she held her tiny lips closer to my ear—"she said I was never to say anything about it—and I promised; so I mustn't, even to you, Miss

Christie dear. You don't mind, do you, because I promised?"

"No, darling, I don't. Of course you must not tell if you promised," said I.

But I would have given the world to know what the child had seen in that mysterious room.

Haidee's strange story had roused again in me all the old feeling of a shadow of some kind hanging over the house on the march which had long since worn away in the quiet routine of my daily life there. The locking of the mother's door against her own child, her wild talk and crying, the "something on the face" that her husband had had to administer to calm her, and the discovery that he himself did not sleep in the same room, all united to call up in my mind the remembrance of that long talk I had had with Mr. Rayner in the school-room soon after my arrival, the story he had told me of her boy's death, and the change it had made in her, and his allusion to "those outbreaks which sometimes cause me the gravest—the very gravest anxiety."

I had understood then that he feared for his wife's reason, but, never having witnessed any great change in her cold listless manner myself, and having seen on the whole very little of her except at meals, all fear and almost all remembrance of her possible insanity had faded in my mind, in which she remained a background figure. But now Haidee's story caused me to wonder whether there was not an undercurrent in the affairs of the household of which I knew little or nothing. What if Mr. Rayner, bright, cheerful, and good tempered as he always seemed, were really suffering under the burden of a wife whose sullen silence might at any moment break into wild insanity—if he had to wrestle in secret, as from the child's story, seemed to have been the case quite recently on two successive nights, with moods of wild wailing and weeping which he at first tried to deal with by gentle remonstrance (Haidee said that on the second night, when she was fully awake his voice was very low and soft), and at last had to subdue by sedatives?

And then a suggestion occurred to me which would at least explain Sarah's important position in the household. Was she perhaps in truth a responsible guardian of Mrs. Rayner, such as, if the latter's reason were really feeble, it would be necessary for her to have in her husband's absence? I already knew that the relations between mistress and servant were not very amicable. Though she treated her with all outward signs of respect, it was not difficult to see that Sarah despised her mistress, while I had sometimes surprised in the wide gray eyes of the other a side-glance of dislike and fear which made me wonder how she could tolerate in her household a woman to whom she had so strong an aversion. That Mr. Rayner was anxious to keep the scandal of having a mad wife a secret from the world was clear from the fact that not even Mr. Lawrence Reade, who seemed to take a particular interest in the affairs of the household at the Alders, had ever shown the least suspicion that this was the case. So the secluded life Mrs. Rayner led came to be ascribed to the caprice—if the village gossips did not use a harsher word—of her husband, while that unfortunate man was really not her tyrant, but her victim.

The only other possible explanation of what Haidee had seen was that Mr. Rayner, kind and sweet-tempered to every one as he always was, and outwardly gentle and thoughtful to a touching degree towards his cold wife, was really the most designing of hypocrites, and was putting upon his wife, under the semblance of devoted affection, a partial restraint which was as purposeless as it was easy for her to break through. This idea was absurd.

The other supposition, dreadful as it was, was far more probable. I was too much accustomed by this time to Mrs. Rayner's listless moods and the faint far off looks of fear, or anger, or suspicion that I sometimes saw in her eyes, to be alarmed even by the possibility of a change for the worse in her—the thought that she was scarcely responsible for her words and actions reconciled me somewhat to her cold manner to myself and to the jealousy of the hold I was surely getting upon Haidee's affection. But my strongest feeling was not for the half-witted wife nor for the unfortunate husband, but for the child herself, the unsuspected witness of her mother's outbreaks of incoherent words and cries. It was strange that these attacks should occur only at night, I thought at first; but then I remembered that these

in the drawing-room, the fearful excitement into which, apparently without any cause, she had fallen, which her husband's entrance had as suddenly subdued—at least for the time; for how could I tell what had followed when he had led her away into that bedroom of hers which was beginning to have for me the fascination of a haunted chamber?

The immediate result of the child's confidences to me was a great increase of my love for and interest in herself. We became almost inseparable in and out of school hours; I encouraged her in talk; and she soon fell into the habit of telling me, while I was listening or not, those long rambling stories which have no beginning, no sequel, and no end, which are the solace of children who have no companions of their own age. When my attention was wandering from these incoherent tales, I sometimes had it abruptly brought back by some slight of her childish fancy, which not me considering if it had been suggested by some half-forgotten experience. Thus one day, when I was working, and she was sitting on a foot stool by my side, with two or three twigs bearing oak-apples which represented, as far as I could judge from her severity to scene and her tenderness to the others, the personages of her story, my attention was arrested by the words—

"And so the Prince said to Princess Christie—the heroine of the story, so named in honor of me—"I've brought you some jewels much finer than yours." But Princess Christie cried and said, 'I don't want them. Where did you get them? I know where you got them. You are a naughty bad Prince, and I won't wear any jewels any more.'"

And I thought of what Mr. Rayner had told me of his wife's hearing, on her return home from a ball, of her baby boy's death and of her saying she would never wear jewels again. But Haidee had been but a baby-girl at the time; her words must be but a mere coincidence. But some of the coincidences of her narrative were less difficult of explanation, for she went on—

"And so Prince Caramel said, 'Very well; I'll send you some more roses if you won't throw them away, and some marbles. But you mustn't cry, you know. I won't have a Princess that cries. I shan't look at you in church if you cry. If you don't cry, I'll let you have some jam too as well as butter, and you shall have a ride on the butcher's horse up and down the back-yard. And then I'll put you in a fairy-boat, and we'll fly away—fly away right over the trees and over the marsh, and past Mr. Boggett's and up into the clouds, and live in a swallow's nest, and never do any lessons.'"

And so on, going off in a wild and unexpected way into all sorts of extravagances, while I thought, with burning cheeks, that my demure little maiden had heard and seen more than I had suspected, and marvelled at the tangle of fancy and reality that grew up from it in her innocent mind. And sometimes she would say, "Let us sing Miss Christie;" and I would sing some ballad, while she would coo an irregular but not inharmonious accompaniment. And we were occupied in this fashion, sitting by the open window one afternoon, when Mr. Rayner appeared in the garden.

"Go on, go on; I have been listening to the concert for ever so long. It is as pretty as birds."

But of course we could not go on in face of such a critical auditor; so Mr. Rayner, after complaining that he had taken a ticket for the series, and was not going to be defrauded like that, told me more seriously that I had a very pretty voice, and asked why I did not take pity on their dulness and come into the drawing-room after tea sometimes and sing to them.

"And you have never tried secular music with the viclin, Miss Christie. I believe you're afraid. Sacred music is slow, and you can't read fast; is that it?"

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.

"I know it is too bad of us to want to trespass upon your time after tea, which we promised you should have to yourself. But it would indeed be a charitable action if you would come an let us bore you by our chattering and our dull chat sometimes, instead of slipping up to your turret-chamber, to be no more seen for the remainder of the evening. What do you do there, if I may

ask? Do you take observations of the moon and stars? I should think you must be too close to them up there to get a comprehensive view. Or do you peep into the bird's nests upon the highest branches and converse with the owners?"

"I do nothing half so fantastic, Mr. Rayner. I do my tasks and read something improving, and then I sit in one of my arm-chairs and just think and enjoy myself."

"Well, we are not going to let you enjoy yourself up there while we are moped to death down-stairs; so to night you may just come and share our dulness in the drawing-room."

So after tea Mr. Rayner got out his violin, and I sat down to the piano; and we played first some German popular songs and then a long succession of the airs, now lively, now pathetic, now dramatic and passionate, out of the old operas that have delighted Europe for years, such as *The Huguenots*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, and *Belle's* graceful *Rose of Castile* and *The Bohemian Girl*. Mr. Rayner played with the fire of an enthusiast, and again I caught the spirit of his playing, and accompanied him, he said, while his face shone with the ecstasy of the musician, as no one had ever accompanied him before.

Doctor Meitland, a usual gentleman who, Mr. Rayner privately told me, was now resting from his labors with the proud consciousness that he had seldom failed in "killing his man," 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 seemed to have the same soul!" he cried, awestruck.

And after that his astonishment evidently outweighed the pleasure he took in our performance. 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 he had finished, and Mr. Rayner was putting his violin into its case, he suddenly discovered that the corner of the latter was damp.

"This will never do," he exclaimed, with as much affectionate concern as if a friend's well being had been threatened. "I might as well keep it in the garden as in this den," he went on, quite irritably for him—nurse always wrought him to a high pitch of excitement. "Here, Sarah," he added turning towards 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 was on the left hand side of the staircase. Did Mr. Rayner sleep in the study? I could not let my curiosity lead me to follow her, such as I should have liked to solve this little mystery. I knew all the rooms on the upper story, and, except the nursery where Mona and Jane slept, the cook's room, Sarah's, and the one I had left, they all bore distinctly the impress of having been long unused. So I was obliged reluctantly to go up stairs. When I got to the foot of my turret staircase however, 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—there was a door here also, but it was generally open and fastened back—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. That, then, was Mr. Rayner's room. But as the door went back on its hinges and 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.

It was the elish baby-girl Mona who first put me on the track of the solution of the