

IN GOLDEN BONDS.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Miss Christie!"

It was Mr. Rayner calling softly through the door. I did not answer or move.

"Miss Christie my dear child, are you there? Are you conscious? Are you ill?"

And I heard the handle of the door turn; but it was locked. I raised my head from the ground, and said, in a weak quivering voice—

"I am not ill, thank you, and I am quite conscious."

"But your voice is weak? Are you hurt? Did that woman hurt you?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no; I am only frightened; I am not hurt. I will tell you all about it to-morrow, Mr. Rayner. I can't talk now."

"But I cannot go away and sleep, my child, till I am quite satisfied that you are all right. Put on your dressing-gown, and come out and let me see you and be sure."

But I felt that I could not leave my room again that night.

"I am really quite well, only I cannot come out to-night, Mr. Rayner. I am too much shaken with the fright; I am indeed."

"I will fetch you some brandy-and-water, and put it here for you, outside the door, then."

"No, please don't; I should not dare to take it in. I feel that, if I opened the door, she might get in. If I saw her again to-night, it would kill me!" I sobbed. "Oh, please keep her away!"

I was getting hysterical again.

"She shall not come near you, child; I swear it! You are quite safe. I will lock the door at the bottom of these stairs, and come and let you out myself in the morning," he said, in a low voice.

The thought of being locked in did not reassure me much; but I thanked him and wished him good night, with a last piteous appeal to him to keep Sarah away. Then I rose from the floor, stumbled to the table, struck a match and lighted my candle, and put it by my bedside. For the first time I was afraid of the dark. And I lay awake listening, and starting at the tiny cracks the wood made, until at last, worn out, I fell asleep.

The next morning I heard Mr. Rayner unlock the door at the foot of the staircase when I had just opened mine, ready to go down. He waited for me, looking up anxiously, and seemed shocked at my appearance. I had noticed myself, as I was dressing, how white and haggard I looked, and how dull and heavy my eyes were, with black rings around them.

"You ought not to have got up at all. You should have stayed in bed and had your breakfast brought up to you."

I shuddered: I had had enough of bedside visits for a long time, and the thought of being a semi-invalid waited on by Sarah was too much for my self-command.

"Take my arm, child; you can scarcely walk. Come to breakfast; a cup of hot coffee will do you good. And, after that, you shall come into the study, and we will talk. Don't say anything about it at breakfast; it might frighten my wife."

I took his arm, for I really was not quite steady on my feet; and he led me into the dining-room, and put me into an arm-chair instead of the one I usually occupied at prayers. Then Haidee, who had seen at once that there was a change in me, and given me a double kiss as consolation, rang the bell to summon the servants to prayers. I held the arms of my chair, and kept my eyes on the ground, and my lips tightly closed that I might give no sign when I saw Sarah's face again; but, when they came in, I knew without looking up that she was not there. And Jane waited at table. Had Sarah gone already? My heart leaped at the thought. At breakfast Mr. Rayner said—

"I am going to propose a holiday for today. Both mistress and pupil are looking very weary, and I think a day's rest from lessons will do both good. My motives are not wholly unselfish, I am sorry to say, for I have the penny-bank accounts to do, and I want you to help me with them, Miss Christie, if you will be so kind as to spare me a couple of hours. I won't keep you longer."

I assented rather nervously. I should have a scene to go through with Mr. Rayner, and an announcement to make which would entail a lot of argument and some persuasion and resistance, which I scarcely felt equal to, shaken as I was.

"At what time will you want me, Mr. Rayner?"

"How soon after breakfast can you come?"

"May I have an hour first to finish some work I have to do? It doesn't matter, if you would rather—"

"In an hour's time I shall expect you in the study, then."

After breakfast, I went up-stairs, where I found Jane doing my room. I caught her looking at me shyly, as if I had gone up in interest in her eyes. She must have heard something of the night's adventure—I wanted to know what. She prepared to leave the room when I entered.

"Never mind, Jane; don't go. You have nearly finished, I see. So you are doing the rooms this morning?"

"Yes, miss; I've got to get into the way of it, miss."

She gave a gasp, as if to continue, but stopped.

"Well?" said I, smiling, to encourage her to talk.

"You know Sarah's going away, miss."

"Is she?" said I, unable to keep my face from brightening up at the welcome words.

"Yes, miss. Oh, there has been a rumour, and no mistake! You just should have heard her go on! But she's going, and I'm not sorry for one."

"What is she going away for?" asked I.

"Don't you know, miss?"

She spoke shyly, but was evidently prepared to disbelieve me if I said "No."

"I can guess; but what reason did she give you?"

"Oh, it's along of you, miss! She burst into cook and me this morning, and said as she wasn't going to stay in a house where there was such goings on. That was what she said, miss." And she paused, her shyness again getting the better of her anxiety to pour out all she had heard.

"Go on, go on. You know I asked you to tell me," said I gently.

"Well, miss, she said all kind o' things about you; but we didn't take much notice o' them, cook and me; we're used to old Sally. But then she said—she said—"

"Yes—well?"

"She said as how she went up to your room, hearing a noise, and then, as how—"

"Go on."

"Then as how—Mr. Rayner came up and—wasn't best pleased to find her there—"

"Yes—well!"

But Jane would not go on, but got very red, and fidgeted about with the cloth she was holding. And suddenly, as I watched the girl in wonder, the whole awful truth flashed upon me of the complexion Sarah had given to the story. I did not speak for a minute—I only felt a strange little flitting pain that seemed to be round my heart—and then I said very quietly—

"I suppose she didn't tell you that she tried to steal something I wear round my neck; that, when she found she couldn't, she threw a handkerchief steeped in some drug over my face to make me unconscious, that she might get at it more easily; that it was my screams that brought Mr. Rayner up-stairs, and that he stood outside and called her till she came to him. Here, I'll show you the very handkerchief."

I had tucked it down in the corner of one of the drawers. It still smelt faintly of the stuff it had been soaked in. Little Jane's face brightened with wonder and downright honest pleasure.

"I'm that glad, miss, I could dance," said she. "She said Mr. Rayner let her fall down-stairs in the dark, and went on up without taking no notice—and she really is a good deal bruised, and serve her right. But there never is no believing Sarah. And for her to talk about goings on! Oh, my, we did laugh, cook and me!" And Jane chattered on about Sarah and her many unpleasant attributes till she had finished her work, and left the room with a bright grin of friendship.

So Sarah, after doing me another wrong worse than all the rest in circulating lies to injure my reputation, was going. But she would probably not go at once, and I felt that I could not sleep another night in the same house with her. So I turned out all my things and packed my boxes, as I had

determined to do while I lay awake during the past night. I looked into my desk, and found that my note had been replaced! I would announce to Mr. Rayner my determination to go when I went to the study, and ask permission to leave that very afternoon. I was sorry to leave the Alders, Mr. Rayner, and sweet little Haidee; and there was another reason which made the thought of leaving Goldham harder still to bear. But the terrors of the night I had passed through had had an effect upon me strong enough to outweigh every other consideration; even now, by daylight, I could scarcely look around my own familiar little room without a feeling of loathing of the scene of my horrible adventure.

There was another reason of my hasty flight. Sarah was a very valuable servant, as she had insisted, and as Mr. Rayner himself had admitted. Now I was the only obstacle to her remaining, and it was really better that the one of us who could best be replaced should go; and my well-founded fears that she might, after all, be retained in any case helped to strengthen my resolution to go. I had had no salary yet, as I had not been two months at the Alders, but my uncle had given me a sovereign to be put by, in case of emergency, and now the emergency was come. So I packed my boxes, and then went down-stairs rather nervously to the study, having in my pocket the drugged handkerchief as a proof that my adventure was no fancy, as I guessed that Mr. Rayner would try to make me believe.

Mr. Rayner said "come in" when I knocked, got up, placed me in an arm-chair by the fire, and asked me to wait while he spoke to Sam. He left the room, and I cautiously made friends with his big dog, who shared the hearthrug with me. He was very gracious, and I had progressed so far as to slide down from my seat to caress him better, when I looked up and saw Sarah.

I sprang to my feet, with a scream that I could not repress, and darted to the bell.

"Don't!" said she sharply. "At least, wait one moment—give me a hearing. I'll stay here—so. Mr. Rayner'll be here in a minute; he won't leave you for long," said she, in a disagreeable voice. "I can't hurt you. I didn't mean to hurt you last night; and I didn't want to steal your letter. What should I want to steal a bit of paper for? You see I know what it is. I only wanted to read it. I'm of a curious disposition, and I don't stick at much to find out what I want to know—if it's only trifles. The stuff on that handkerchief wouldn't have hurt you, only made you sleep a little sounder, so as I could take the letter. I'd have put it back. I'm sorry I frightened you. I've come to ask you to forgive me."

She said it in a dry hard tone not as if she really repented her cruel action a bit.

"No, no; I can't forgive you—at least, not yet," I said incoherently. "It wasn't only wanting to steal my letter and to stupefy me, but the way you looked at me, the cruel way—as if—as if you would have liked to kill me," I said, growing more excited as I remembered the terrible glare of her eyes when she sprang at me the second time. "I can't forget it—oh, I can't forget it! And you did something worse than that; you told the cook and Jane that Mr. Rayner was coming up to my room! Oh, that was wicked of you, for you know it wasn't true."

"That's that little tattling Jane, I know!" said Sarah vixenishly. "I never said such a thing at all; but she likes to make a story out of everything she hears. You know what a chatterbox she is, miss."

I did know it; but I did not think Jane was likely to have altered Sarah's story much. I was silent for a minute. Sarah began again in a different tone.

"You're very hard upon a poor servant, Miss Christie, and it isn't generous of you. I don't deny that I was jealous of you, and that I wanted to prove to Mr. Rayner that you had letters on the sly from a young gentleman. There now—I've made a clean breast of it! But don't it seem hard that I, who've served him and his well for nigh seven years, should have to go just at the word of a young lady who hasn't been here two months?"

"It isn't at my word, Sarah; I have nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do with it? Can you deny that you dislike me?"

"I should never have disliked you if you

had not over and over again shown that you hated me, and that it was distasteful to you even to have to serve me. And, as to your going away, I heard about it only this morning through asking Jane why she was doing my room."

I blushed as I said this; but I could not confess to Sarah that the first mention I had heard of her departure was when I was listening outside the door of this very room on the night before.

"Then you don't want me to go away?"

"It doesn't matter to me whether you go or stay, as I have packed my boxes, and am going back to London myself this very afternoon."

Sarah stared. Then she gave a disagreeable laugh.

"You won't go," said she.

"You can go up-stairs and look at my boxes," I said indignantly.

"Have you spoken to Mr. Rayner about it yet, may I ask, miss?" said she drily.

"Not yet; but I am going to tell him this morning."

"Then would you mind, before you go, miss"—she laid a peculiar emphasis on these words—"asking Mr. Rayner to let me stay? It won't matter to you, you see; but it's more to me than I can tell."

And, for the first time during the interview, there was a real emotion in her voice.

"But what I might say wouldn't make any difference, Sarah," I remonstrated gently. "You overrate my importance in this household in the strangest way. My words haven't half the weight on Mr. Rayner that yours have." Sarah looked at me eagerly as I said this, but she did not seem satisfied. "That is quite right and natural, as you have been here so long and are so much older too."

She did not like my saying that, I saw, by the tightening of her thin lips; but I certainly had not meant to offend her. However, after a minute's pause, she said again—

"Then, as you won't be afraid of your words having any effect, miss, perhaps you will let me ask Mr. Rayner to let me stay."

I shrugged my shoulders at her strange persistency; my words would certainly make no difference, and, as I was going away, she would probably stay; so I said—

"Very well; I will ask him."

"You promise, miss?" said she with a strange light in her eyes. "Gentlefolks like you don't break their word, I know," she went on quickly. "So, if you only say 'I promise' I shall know I can trust you, and that you bear no malice."

She must indeed be anxious to obtain what she asked when she could stoop so far as to class me with "gentlefolks."

"I promise," said I.

She might have shown a little gratitude for what she had been so eager to get, I thought; but, as soon as the words had left my lips, she drew herself up from her imploring attitude triumphantly, and, with a simple, cold "Thank you, miss," left the room.

Then I felt as if the study had suddenly grown lighter. Before long Mr. Rayner returned. I said nothing about Sarah's visit, and nothing about my own departure, until I had done the very little there was to do in settling the accounts of the penny-bank. This work had only been an excuse for giving me a holiday, because I looked ill, I felt sure; and, when it was finished Mr. Rayner sent me back to the arm-chair again and poured me out a glass of wine. I began to feel nervous about my announcement.

"Have you quite got over your cruel fright now, little woman?" said he kindly.

"As much as one can get over a thing like that," I said, in a low voice, my fingers shaking.

"One can't forget it at once, of course; but I hope that a little care and a little kindness will soon drive that unpleasant adventure right out of your head."

"If you mean your care and kindness," said I, looking up gratefully, "why, you can't give me more than you have given me already, Mr. Rayner. But there are some experiences which one can never forget except away from the scene where they happened. And, oh, Mr. Rayner," I went on quickly, "you mustn't think me ungrateful or capricious; but I have packed my boxes, and I want to ask you to release me from my engagement and let me go back to London by this afternoon's train! For, if I