

IN GOLDEN BONDS.

CHAPTER III.—(CONTINUED.)

"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 at first, but warming into vehemence towards the close of my speech.

"Perhaps she means to be kind," said he gently.

"Then she ought to make her meaning plainer. She can't think it is kind to fix her eyes upon me as if I were something not human, if I laugh, to give me her hand so coldly and unresponsively that it seems like a dead hand in mine, and at other times to take no more notice of me than if I were not there. Besides, she knows that it is the first time I have ever left home, and she must see sometimes that I am not happy."

Mr. Reade suddenly stooped towards me, and then straightened himself again just as suddenly, without any remark; but he cleared his throat. I remembered that I had no right to make this confession to a comparative stranger, and I added quickly—

"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 curiously incredulous tones.

"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 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.

The young man drew back, muttered "I beg your pardon," and, turning to watch the rain, began to hum something without any time to cover his discomfort. I was sorry directly; but my dignity forbade my calling him back to retract the snub. Yet I was dying to know the reason of his violent prejudice against Mr. Rayner. To my relief, in a few minutes he came back to me of his own accord.

"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 herself confessed that she 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 case of a gentleman."

I was scarcely experienced enough to have found that out for myself. I considered for a moment, and then said rather timidly—

"Won't you tell me anything more? You can if you will, I think, and, alone in the world as I am, 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 sat down beside me on the other shaft of the cart, and 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 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 humours; 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?" Then, turning, he saw my companion. "Hallo, 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. When we got in sight of the park, Mr. Reade wanted to take a short cut through it to the house; but Mr. Rayner pointed out that there was no object to be gained by catching a bad cold wading through the long wet grass, so we all went together as far as the park gates, when Mr. Reade left us.

"Nice young fellow, that," said Mr. Rayner, as soon as the other was out of earshot. "Just the kind of open frack lad I should have liked to have for a son in a few years' time. Handsome too, and good-natured. There's not a girl in all the country-side 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 coquettes; younger 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 with 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 recognise her, and could only guess that it was Mrs. Rayner. The idea of those great wild 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 the 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. I stood, without acknowledging it to myself, rather in awe of this woman; she was so tall and so thin, and had such big eagle eyes and such a curiously constrained manner. 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! Ma!"

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

"O! 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. I am not surprised, for the tone of cold command with which he spoke those last insignificant words inspired me with a sudden sense of fear of him, with a feeling that I was face to face with an irresistible will, such as I should have thought impossible for light-hearted Mr. Rayner to inspire.

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 recognised 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. I waited behind the curtain by the window until long after he had gone back towards the study, feeling guiltily that his sharp eyes must find me out, innocently as I had played the spy. If he were to speak to me in the tone that he had used to Sarah, I felt that I should run away or burst into tears, or do something else equally foolish and unbecoming in an instructress of youth. But no one molested me. When I crept away from the window and went softly up-stairs to my room, there was no one about, and no sound to be heard in the house save a faint clatter of tea-things in the servants' hall. At tea-time, Mr. Rayner was as bright as usual, and laughingly declared that they should never trust me to go to church by myself again.

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, putting aside the fact that

I had no stronger grounds than other people's prejudices and suspicion for thinking it imprudent to stay, and that I could see no sign of the dangers Mr. Reade had hinted at so vaguely, what reason could I offer either to my employers or to my mother for wishing to go? This sort of diffidence at inventing excuses is a strong barrier to action in young people. And, if I had overcome this diffidence sufficiently to offer a plausible motive for leaving the Alders, where was I to go?

My father was dead; my mother, who had been left with very little to live upon, had been glad, at the time when it was agreed that I should begin to earn my own living, to accept an offer to superintend the household of a brother of hers who had not long lost his wife. My uncle would, I knew, give me a home while I looked out for another situation, but I understood now how few people seemed to want the services of "a young lady, aged eighteen, who preferred children under twelve."

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? If I said, Because the house was damp, people would think I was too particular. And, if I said I was afraid my pupil's mother was mad, they would want some better reason than the fact that she talked very little and moved very softly for believing me. And, if I said I had been told the place was dangerous, and so thought I had better go, they would think I was mad myself. And, besides these objections to my leaving, was there not, to a young mind, an unacknowledged attraction in the faint air of mystery that hung about the place, which would have made the ordinary British middle-class household seem rather uninteresting after it? 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, as I put on a dainty china-blue cotton frock that I had never worn before, I could not help noticing how much better I was looking than when I lived in London. Instead of being pale, I had now a pink color in my cheeks, and my eyes seemed to look larger and brighter than they used to do. After a minute's pleased contemplation of my altered appearance, I turned from the glass in shame. What would my mother say if she could see how rain her daughter was growing? Without another look even to see whether I had put in my brooch straight, 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.

The morning sun left this side of the house in shade. The birds were twittering in the ivy and stirring the heavy leaves as they flew out frightened at the noise of the opening window; the dew was sparkling on the grass, and the scent of the flowers was deliciously sweet.

"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. I was smelling a rose while I tried to recover the staid demourner I cultivated as most suitable to my profession. When I raised my eyes, he was looking at me and still laughing.

"You are fond of roses?"

"Yes, very, Mr. Rayner."

I might own so much without any derogation from my dignity.

"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? I have always thought that ostentation of humility spoils an otherwise amiable character."

He laughed.

"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. Like that the story happens every day."

I only shook my head gently; I could not contradict Mr. Rayner, but I would not believe him.