

IN GOLDEN BONDS.

CHAPTER XXII.—CONTINUED.

She looked at me in a frightened irresolute way, and then she formed with her lips rather than spoke the words.

"Yes—rather cold—now."

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable in one of the rooms up-stairs while the fogs last?" I insinuated shyly.

But I saw that her breath was beginning to come fast, and the faint pink to tinge her cheeks as it did when she was excited.

"Did any one tell you to say that to me?" she asked in a whisper.

"I told Mr. Rayner, when I wrote, that we had a slight fog here on Tuesday night, and this morning I had a letter saying that he thought it was bad for you to sleep on the ground floor when the mists had begun to rise high, and that he had told Sarah to prepare the large front spare-room for you."

Instead of looking grateful for this proof of her husband's thoughtfulness, she became agitated, and at last her agitation grew almost uncontrollable; she trembled and clung to the bars inside the window, and I saw that her forehead was wet with the effect of some strong emotion—it looked like fear.

"At last—at last! I have been here too long," she gasped.

I thought that the effect on her nervous temperament of making her leave the room against her will would outweigh any physical good the change might do her. The wild look was coming into her eyes which I had seen there twice before, and I was afraid of her being seized with a paroxysm while I stood there on the other side of the barred window, powerless to help her; so I said gently—

"Of course Mr. Rayner would not wish you to go if you did not wish it."

But she shook her head, and, putting her face between the bars to be closer to me, she said, in a low broken voice—

"Do you know what his wishes mean when Sarah carries them out?"

I stood looking at her, appalled. Her terror was so real that it infected me, and for the moment I almost shared the poor lady's mad belief that there was a conspiracy against her. But her next words restored me to my senses.

"Are you against me too?" she asked piteously. "I always thought you were; but then you were kind to my child—and I don't know, I don't know whom to trust!"

"You may trust me, dear Mrs. Rayner, indeed," said I earnestly. "I would not have suggested your leaving your room if I thought it would cause you so much pain. Indeed I did not know you were so much attached to it."

She shuddered. There was a pause, during which she stared at me sternly and searchingly. But I had no cause to fear her poor mad eyes, so I returned her gaze, and she grew gradually calmer.

"Miss Christie," said she at last, in a whisper, "you have influence in this house. That night when Haidee was ill you made Sarah obey you. If I may trust you, give me this proof—get me one day's respite. Let me stay in my own room till—to-morrow."

Her voice sank till I could hardly catch the last words.

"I will try," said I softly. "And, oh, Mrs. Rayner, shall I tell Sam to take the dead leaves away in a wheelbarrow? I am sure it can't be wholesome to have them so close to your window."

"No, no, leave them—never mind," said she hurriedly. "You must be in the water. You will catch cold. Go—Heaven bless you!"

She shut down the window in a frightened way, and disappeared into the room. I could not see in, for the window-sill was some eight or ten inches above my head. I turned and splashed my way back, with my teeth chattering, to the house, and changed my wet shoes and stockings, half crying for pity for the poor, helpless, forlorn lady for whom I could do so little.

At tea-time she came into the dining-room, and, as Sarah was there, I practised the innocent deception of pretending not to have seen her before that day. I thought it better that the lynx-eyed guardian should not discover that I had found a way of communicating privately with her unlucky charge. So I said again at tea-time that I had had a letter from Mr. Rayner, and that he thought that on Saturday she had better move into spare room.

"Saturday!" interrupted Sarah sharply. "Yes," said I, rather frightened at telling such a story. "Do you think you would like to go to-morrow, or would you rather go to-night, Mrs. Rayner?" I asked gently.

"To-morrow," said she, with a steady look which I took as an acknowledgment; and I turned to Sarah.

"I will answer for it to Mr. Rayner, if there has been any mistake," I said, as modestly as I could, for it was an awkward thing to have to give orders before the mistresses of the house, however tottering her reason might be.

"Very well, miss," said Sarah, to my surprise.

For the second time my use of Mr. Rayner's name had acted like a charm; and I wondered how this woman, who had dared so much to cut me off from communication with Laurence, could calmly submit to receive orders from me.

After tea, Mrs. Rayner in her turn surprised me by a warning which seemed to show keen observation. She came and stood by me at the fire-place while Sarah was clearing the table, and once, while the latter was for a moment out of the room, breathed softly into my ear, without turning her head.

"Take care—she hates you, and she is dangerous!"

I glanced up quickly; but Sarah was already back in the room, and Mrs. Rayner's face was as impassive as ever.

I was so much used to living in fear of Sarah that the warning did not make any particular impression upon me, and I went to bed neither more nor less afraid of her machinations than usual.

I woke up in the night without being conscious of any cause for doing so. I had started at once into full wakefulness, and I saw that Haidee was sleeping quietly, and that the fire was still alight, but had burnt low; and I thought I would replenish it.

Then, as I raised myself on my elbow, I thought I heard a sound, too faint to be called a noise, outside the door. So I kept quite still and listened intently. I heard nothing for some time, then again a muffled noise as of something being shuffled softly from one stair to another, then again no sound. The turret staircase was uncarpeted; it had once been polished, but the bees-wax had worn off long since and had not been renewed. I got out of bed softly, lighted my candle by putting a match to the dying fire to avoid the noise of striking it, crept to the door, and literally put my ear to the keyhole. And, after a few moments, I heard the same soft shuffling again. It might be Nap, Mr. Rayner's retriever, trying to find a stair softer than the rest to lie upon; yet they were surely too narrow for him to make the attempt.

Whatever or whatever it was seemed to be making its way down by very slow degrees, until it seemed that it must be about six or seven stairs from the top. I screwed up my courage and resolved to give the intruder, human or otherwise, a fright. All the locks were kept in good condition at the Alders, and there was not such a thing as a creaking door in the place. I turned the key with the least noise, then the handle, and flung open the door, stamping my foot and brandishing the candle. I heard Haidee scream; I had forgotten her.

My plan succeeded only too well. A figure which had been crouching on the stairs sprang up. It was Sarah.

Before I had time to do more than recognise the savage frightened face, her foot slipped, and, with a piercing cry, she fell backward down the stairs. The staircase had one turn. I, trembling at the door, saw her long thin hands clutching and struggling to save herself at the corner; but she had fallen, and I heard a heavy thud, and then a groan. She had fallen headlong to the bottom.

For one second I leaned against the wall unable to move; then, trembling so that I could scarcely find the top stair, I stepped forward to go down. But on the second stair my foot suddenly slipped, and, if I had not been going very slowly because of my agitation, I must have fallen. On the next stair I slipped again; on the next to that, putting out my foot very cautiously, I found a string fastened across.

With a sudden suspicion, I sat down without advancing farther, and slid my hand along the stair. It was slippery; so were the others. The turret staircase was dark even by day; if I had been running down stairs at my usual pace, nothing could have saved me. It was a trap set by Sarah, if

not for getting rid of me altogether, at least for seriously injuring me. She was groaning the stairs one by one when I had heard her; in her alarm at my sudden appearance, she had sprung up, her foot had slipped on the greasy plate below which she had been using, and she had fallen herself a victim to the trap she had laid for me. And, as the horrible truth broke upon me, I heard another groan and a murmur I could not distinguish.

Sick at heart, and for the moment almost as helpless as she, I crawled down the stairs, wondering and fearing what spectacle would meet my eyes at the bottom.

CHAPTER XXIII.

All the stairs below where Sarah had slipped were safe and in their usual state. At the bottom, an almost senseless heap, lay Sarah, with one arm twisted under her and her head in a pool of blood. She was moaning, with closed eyes, and did not know me when her eyes opened and she stared round her.

The noise of her fall had by this time brought out Jane from the distant nursery; and she ran for the cook, who was an older and more experienced woman, and who indeed proved useful in this emergency. It was past midnight; but, late as it was, I was obliged to send Jane into the village for Sam, to tell him to take one of the horses and ride as fast as he could to Beaconsburgh for the doctor. Meanwhile the cook declared her belief that one of Sarah's arms were broken, for she faintly when it was touched; and then, having discovered that the blood was flowing from a great gash at the back of her head, she bound it up as well as she could to stop the bleeding. Then I ran down-stairs for some brandy, which we put to her lips from time to time, but in vain tried to make her swallow. And then we sat in the cold, in the dim light of a candle, both of us crouched on the floor, the cook supporting the wounded woman against her knee, I a little way behind, lest she should recover full consciousness and know me.

It was a ghastly thing to be sitting there with that horrid stair on the floor within a few feet, listening to the feeble moans of the wretched woman whom we hardly expected to live until help came, holding our breath when for a few moments the moaning ceased. I thinking of the awful retribution her malice had brought down on her, not daring to speak to tell her I forgave her, lest my voice should have some terrible effect upon her wandering mind. And so we sat shivering not with cold alone, until the front-door bell scudded through the silent house, and Jane, who had not dared to come up-stairs again since she went to send off Sam, opened the door, and we heard the doctor's heavy tread on the stairs.

It was Doctor Lowe. He called first for more light. Jane brought a lamp, and he signed me to bid her to go away. After asking me whether I was hysterical, and hearing me answer "No," he told me to hold the lamp while he made his examination. He said afterwards that I had strong nerves; but nothing but fear of him kept me steady at my post, as, with averted head, I heard the sharp little cries the wounded woman gave two or three times. The cook had been right; the arm that lay under Sarah was broken; the Doctor could not tell yet whether her spine was not injured too. He cut off her long black hair and strapped up her head, which had received a gash which might affect the brain, he said; and he set and bandaged the broken arm. Then we brought a mattress, and very carefully lifted her on to it, carried her to her room, and put her in the bed.

"Who is going to sit up with her?" asked he.

"I will," said I, but added doubtfully, "if—"

"If what?" said the Doctor, turning upon me sharply.

I drew him a little apart and said—

"Doctor Lowe, do you think the sight of any one she disliked very much would be bad for her?"

He looked at me very keenly as he answered—

"No. She won't be able to recognize anybody; but I warn you she will be restless. How did the accident happen?"

"She fell down stairs."

"The staircase leads to your room, doesn't it? How came she to be there at this time of night? Why don't you tell me the truth, and save me the trouble of making stupid guesses?"

I told him the truth, and his only comment was—

"And don't you think the moral of that is that you should leave this place as soon as possible?"

"I shan't stay here long," said I, smiling, and thinking of Laurence.

"Oh, you think that young fellow at the Hall is going to marry you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I tell you frankly, I wouldn't take a wife from this house."

"But then you wouldn't take a wife from anywhere, Doctor Lowe. If you did, you would think more of the girl than of the place she came from, just as Laurence does."

"You have a sharp little tongue. I pity Laurence when he comes home late."

He asked after Haidee; but I could not let him see her, as the staircase was not yet ready; so, after giving me instructions about the treatment of Sarah, he left the house.

There was a fire already in her room, for she was by no means the ill-used creature she liked to think herself. I seated myself in a chair beside it, prepared to watch until morning, when the cook had promised to take my place. Before long the patient began to grow restless, as the Doctor had predicted; she turned her head from side to side, tried to raise her broken arm, which had been set and bandaged tightly down, muttering and meaning incoherently. Presently she was quite quiet, and I hoped she had gone to sleep. I think I must have dozed myself for a few minutes, when I was startled into full wakefulness by a low hoarse cry of "Jim!"

She had managed to move her head so that her great black eyes, glittering now with fever, were fixed full upon me; and my heart beat fast, for I thought she must know me. But she repeated, still staring at me—

"Jim!" Then she added in a whisper,

"They are after you, Jim! It's about the cheque. You must be off to-night. Go to the old place. I'll put 'em off, and I'll let you know."

Then more mutterings and exclamations, and before long she began again to speak coherently—

"It's too risky, Jim. I'll do it, if you want me to; but it's putting yourself in danger as well as me. All right, I'll pass it."

Then she broke out passionately—

"It's an ill thing you're going to do, James Woodfall. What do you want of a lady for a wife? Her money's none so much, and, as for her pretty face, it's the face of a fool. I'm twice the woman to look at that she is, and I'm only twenty-five; and I've stuck to you through thick and thin. Why don't you marry me, Jim?"

And it flashed across me, as she went on addressing to me reproaches, coaxings, encouragement, and defiance, that she was living over again some long-past passages in her life—passages, I could not but gather, of a very questionable character. For it was plain that this Jim, or James Woodfall, who occupied all her thoughts, had been a very bad man indeed, and that Sarah had assisted him in every way in his wicked deeds.

"Don't go for that, James," she said once imploringly. "It'll be a lifer if they can catch you; and they've had their eye on you lately. There's many a safer way of getting money than that."

Another pause, and then came a speech which chilled me with horror.

"Dead men tell no tales, Jim," said she, in another fearful whisper. "It's easy done, and it's safer. What's an old man's life that you're so shy of touching him? You've done many a riskier thing. Why do you always turn coward at that?"

I could scarcely sit and watch this woman's face after that. I seemed to see murder in her fierce fiery eyes; and I shuddered even as I moistened her dry lips and touched her burning forehead. She rambled on in the same style, mentioning other names I had never heard, and not a word of me or Mr. and Mrs. Rayner, or even of Tom Parkes, until she broke out angrily—

"Jim's mad about that little Christie girl, Tom, and he says he'll marry her in spite of everything, and I've got to bring it about," she hissed between her teeth.

What awful confusion in her mind was there to connect me with her criminal lover of years before? There suddenly woke up in my mind the remembrance of the evening when, hidden in my "nest," I had overheard a conversation between her and Mr. Rayner's mysterious visitor, who had afterwards turned out to be Mr. Carruther's manservant, and I remembered that she had then expressed jealousy of some man called