



## THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

A Romance.

BY FLORENCE WARDEN.

(Continued from page 84.)

"I haven't met with many yet. I have been fortunate," said I, smiling.

"You have no father, and have always lived quietly with your mother? Of course you write to her often?"

"Oh, yes."

"So that you can have the benefit of her counsel in any difficulty?"

"In any difficulty I should have to think and act for myself, Mrs. Manners, because writing to mamma about it would only make her cry. But I have met with no great difficulties in my life so far."

She looked at me again, as if a little puzzled, and then said:

"I hope you will not think I am catechizing you rudely; but Mr. Manners and I take great interest in you, knowing how young and inexperienced you are. I want you to feel sure, my dear Miss Christie, that if you should want a friend's advice at any time, you need not fear to confide in me; and Mr. Manners, being a man and your parish clergyman, could help you in cases where my woman's judgment might be at fault."

I thanked her with tears in my eyes; for, although I did not think it likely that I should ever experience at the Alders any trial that she could help me in, yet her manner was so sincere and so earnest that I was touched by it and grateful for it.

Then we went down-stairs and finished up the evening with music.

While I was playing, Mr. Laurence Reade came in to take his sister home. When I had finished, everybody looked at us as he shook hands with me in a rather distant manner; but he managed to press my hand before he let it go; so I did not mind. And everybody listened as he said:

"We heard up at the Hall dreadful reports that you were ill, Miss Christie, and wouldn't be able to come to the school-visit."

"Oh, no, I wasn't ill! One of the servants gave me a fright in the night," said I. "I woke up and found her in my room, running herself by ransacking my things. Then I screamed with all my might, and Mr. Rayner came up and called her out and scolded her."

"This explanation was listened to with profound attention by everybody in the room; and I was glad I had an opportunity of giving it, as I felt sure that some rumors must have got about; and it was better they should hear my version of the story. Then Mrs. Manners said she hoped Mr. Reade would not desert them at the last; and he promised to come and help, but said she must not expect him to sell pen-wipers."

"You will have to work, not to play, if you come, Mr. Reade, and set a good example to the others."

"I will; but I sincerely hope they will not follow it," said he, in a laughing tone; then he turned and looked at me and made me blush.

And in the slight bustle of departure he whispered to me—

"Wait, and I will come back and take you home."

But, when I had put on my hat and mantle, and Mrs. Manners had led me down into the drawing-room again, to say a few last words to me, and I was wondering how I could wait until Mr. Reade kept his promise and returned, I heard a ring and Mr. Rayner's voice in the hall. I started and blushed, and Mrs. Manners stopped in her talk and looked at me very searchingly.

"Mr. Rayner must have come to fetch you home," she said.

"I am afraid so," I stammered.

She looked colder still at my confusion; but there was only one way out of it, so I burst out—

"Oh, Mrs. Manners, Mr. Reade said he would come to fetch me! What shall I do?"

"You would rather go with him?"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

Her manner changed all at once. She put her arm around me, and drew me to the French window.

"There, my dear—run out there and wait at the gate on the left. That's the way they always come from the Hall. It is a little deception, I am afraid; but there—go, child, go! He is a good lad."

So I ran swiftly across the lawn in the dusk, afraid of Mr. Rayner's seeing me. I heard the gate swing to; but I could not stop myself. And, as Mr. Reade dashed round the corner, running too, I fell against him, and then panted out, "I beg your pardon," very much confused. He had caught me by the arms, and he did not let me go, but held them very gently, while he said—

"Miss Christie! Pray don't apologize. Where were you running?"

"I was going home," I stammered, in a low voice.

"But that is not the way." A pause—then very softly—"Were you coming to meet me?"

"No," said I, half crying, and disengaging myself.

It was humiliating to have been caught running to meet Mr. Reade.

"Well, I had hoped you were. For I've been running like a race-horse to meet you."

I said nothing.

"Why did you want to run home so fast alone, when I had promised to come and fetch you?"

"I didn't want to trouble you."

"That was very kind of you. But, if I happen not to mind the trouble, may I see you home now I am here? Or would you prefer to go alone?"

"I would rather go alone, thank you," said I, though it was heart-breaking to have to say it. But I thought it was time to show some spirit, for I saw that Mr. Reade did not believe me. He stepped aside to let me pass, and raised his hat very stiffly; then his manner changed all at once.

"Why, you are crying! My darling, I didn't mean to make you cry."

I could not stop him—I did try—but he was so much bigger than I that he hid his arms around me before I could get away.

"Oh, Mr. Reade, let me go!" I said, frightened.

But, as I held up my face to say it, he kissed me, and, after that, of course it did not matter, for I knew that he loved me and that I was safe with him.

I remember every word that he said to me as we walked toward the Alders that night; but, if I were to write down, it would read just like the same thing over and over again, and not at all as it sounded to me.

## CHAPTER XV.

Laurence had promised to come for me early the next morning, saying that I should be wanted to help to arrange the stalls.

After breakfast, I went into the schoolroom with Haidee; but I was not in my usual soberly instructive mood; and, when I went in to dinner, and Mr. Rayner said brightly, "Mrs. Manners wanted you to go and help her to prepare for the

afternoon's festivities, Miss Christie; but we were not going to let you tag yourself out, so I said you should come later," I felt for the moment as if I quite disliked him.

After dinner, he himself accompanied Haidee and me to the High Field, where the bazaar and tea took place; Mrs. Rayner was not coming until later. The school-children had been there some time when we reached the field; and some of the rank and fashion of the neighborhood, the quiet people who came as a duty, were making purchases in the marquee. I saw Laurence standing outside the larger but less showy one of the two. He shook hands with a loving pressure, but he only said—

"How do you do, Miss Christie? They expected you earlier."

Just then there was a stir and excitement outside, caused by the arrival of Lady Mills and some of her party. They came into our marquee, and Lady Mills, who I thought had sweeter manners than any lady I had ever seen, thrust a big basket of flowers into my hands and told me to walk up and down and ask people to buy them. And Laurence walked up and down with me; and I sold my flowers quickly, and was very happy indeed, for Laurence talked and whispered to me, and never once left my side. When I had sold all the flowers, he whispered—

"Now let us slip out, and we can talk."

So we tucked my basket under one of the stalls, and went out of the tent and away into a lane near the field; and Laurence's face grew very anxious and unhappy as I asked him what was the matter.

"I don't know," I don't know what the plots and plans may be of the person who has caused me to desert away."

"What do you mean?"

Laurence looked at me in the same intent way as before, then he said—

"Listen, Violet. You are such an innocent little thing that I don't know how to tell you what I must. Last night, when I had left you and got home, I found Mr. Rayner just leaving the Hall. I went straight into the study to speak to my father. You know there is more sympathy between him and me than there is between any of the rest of us, so I told him all about you, and I asked him to find me some occupation at once, for I must have a home to take you to before the year was out. And the dear old dad said you had a good sweet face, and he should like to have such a daughter; but what would the matter say? And I told him I was twenty-four, and old enough to know my own mind, and I didn't care what she wanted. But he begged me not to offend her, and then said, 'She has just been in to tell me she has set her heart on going to the Riviera, and insists on your going with her. Now supposing I took a farm for you while you are away, you can step into it directly you come back, and try your hand at farming for a year or two. So don't say a word to her or to your sisters—you know they always side with her—till you come back. I could not say 'No' to my father—he has been so good to me—and I couldn't refuse to go with my mother; nevertheless I was half mad all the same, for I know who has persuaded her to this.'"

"Do you! Who?"

"Mr. Rayner. When he has been so kind to me, too! What should he persuade her to go away for?"

Laurence looked at me earnestly.

"To get me away."

"To get you away? Why should he do that?"

"He is a bad man."

"Laurence," cried I, "how dare you say such a thing? I turned sharply from him, and was back in the field among the people before he could stop me. Lady Mills and Mr. and Mrs. Rayner came up to me. This lady, who had charmed me so much, had in return taken a fancy to me, and had begged Mr. and Mrs. Rayner to let me go home with her to stay until Monday; and they had consented. At another time this invitation would have made me half mad with delight, but now it seemed only to overwhelm me with terror at the thought of going among so many strangers. However, they sent me home to prepare what things I wanted, and told me to make haste."

## CHAPTER XVI.

There were four ladies already in the carriage which was waiting for me at the gate—Lady Mills herself, with another more matronly-looking lady by her side, whose name, I already knew, was Mrs. Cunningham; and on the opposite seat were a younger lady with a rather sharp expression, named Mrs. Clowes, who was considered very clever, and an unmarried one some years older than I. I made the third on that seat; but there was plenty of room for us all.

It was about seven miles from Goldham to Denham Court; a pretty place built on the side of a slight hill, with the river Doveney running not far from the foot of it. I was shown up into a room that looked out upon greenhouses and cucumber frames, and from which I had a view of the river. I shook out my muslin frock and put it on, and when I fastened the black velvet round my throat, with the beautiful flashing pendant on it, I looked so much nicer than I had thought it possible for me to look that I could not help feeling that life was not quite a blank, and wishing that Laurence could see me.

I had left my room, and was going along the corridor, when I met a man the sight of whom made me start and turn quite cold. For he looked so much like the mysterious visitor at the Alders whom Mr. Rayner had described as a "gentleman," that I had seen two nights before going into the study, with Tom Parkes and Sarah, that I thought it must be he. But this man stood aside for me with the stolidly respectful manner, not of a gentleman, but of a servant; and I hurried past him, feeling quite shocked by the strength of the resemblance; for of course a friend of Mr. Rayner's, however familiarly he might choose to speak to Tom Parkes and Sarah, would not be a man-servant at Denham Court.

After dinner, when I was in the drawing-room with the ladies, some of them drew me on to a sofa, and asked me a number of questions about my life at the Alders and "that handsome Mr. Rayner."

"And is it true that he is such a dreadfully wicked man, Miss Christie?" said one.

"No, he is not wicked. The village-people think he is, because he plays the violin and goes to races. He is very kind."

"Oh, we don't doubt that, my dear!" said Mrs. Clowes, in a demure tone.

"You think I like him only just because he is kind to me," said I boldly. "But I should not like him if he were wicked, however kind he might be."

"And Mrs. Rayner—is she kind and good too?"

"Oh, yes, she is just as kind!" said I.

This was not quite true; but I knew already enough of these people to baffle them would laugh if I said "No;" and it was not poor Mrs. Rayner's fault that she was not as nice as her husband. Presently Mrs. Cunningham took me to the other end of the room to look at a portrait of Lady Mills.

"It is no business of mine who gave you that pendant, my dear; but have you any more ornaments of the kind, and, if so, where do you keep them?" she said gravely.

"Oh, I have no more!" I answered, a little surprised at her manner. "And I keep this in an old case in the corner of my desk."

"Why, my dear child, I have a set that I value very much—no finer than yours, though—diamonds and cat's-eyes—and I sleep with them under my pillow, and even my maid doesn't know where they are."

I showed my astonishment.

"Believe me, when you travel about on a series of visits,

as I am doing now, and are obliged to intrust your dressing-case to a careless maid, it is no unnecessary precaution."

But I shouldn't take so much trouble with my paste pendant," said I.

She shook her head at me, with a laugh, and said dryly—"I should wish such paste as yours."

When, at last, long past the hour when the household at the Alders retired to rest, we dispersed to our rooms, before I went to bed I put, as I thought, my beautiful pendant safely inside my desk, resolved not to wear it again.

## CHAPTER XVII.

I got up next morning directly I was called, and was downstairs long before any of the other people had come down to breakfast.

The bells of Denham Church, which was close by, had begun to ring before breakfast was over, and Lady Mills wanted to know who was going.

"I'm going, for one," said Mrs. Clowes, and she looked across at Mr. Carruthers, who was helping himself to a great deal of marmalade.

"Do try to make up a respectable number," said Lady Mills.

"You can do just what you like, you know, as soon as it is over; and people in the country think so much of it. We scandalize the neighborhood quite enough, as it is, by not going to bed at ten o'clock, and other wicked practices. And last week we were only three at church out of a party of seventeen."

At luncheon Mrs. Clowes described the sermon in a way that made everybody laugh, and said a lot of amusing and sometimes unkind things, as she always did.

Most of the people spent Sunday afternoon under the trees on the lawn. I heard the man-servant give an order to Tom Parkes, calling him, "Here, you gardener, what's your name?" as if he had never seen him before. I pointed out the other man to Mr. Carruthers, and asked if he knew whose servant he was.

"He is mine, and the best I ever had. I've had him six months now, and of late I've given up thinking altogether; he does it for me so much better."

I began to wonder whether this mysterious man-servant was some poor relation of Mr. Rayner's, who had taken to this way of earning his living, but was ashamed of it, and who came privately to see his richer connections, to spare them the talk of the neighbors about what people like the Reades, for instance, would certainly consider a great disgrace. So I got up and ran away with Mr. Cole to the fruit-garden, where he gathered plums for me; and we looked at the chickens, and watched the fish in the pond until dinner-time.

Mr. Cole had cut me some beautiful flowers to wear in the front of my frock, for I had resolved not to wear my pendant again; but my muslin gown did not look nearly so well without it, and I thought I would just take it out and see the effect of it at my throat close to the flowers, and then put it away again. But when I unlocked my desk and opened the shabby case in which Mr. Rayner had given it to me, the pendant was gone.

It had been stolen—by whom I could not guess. At first I thought I would go to Lady Mills and tell her privately all about it; but my courage failed me; for if my loss got known there would be an unpleasant scene for all the servants and a sense of discomfort in the entire household. So I resolved to say nothing about it, but to bear my loss, which I felt more than I should have thought possible, in silence.

I went down-stairs to dinner with a piece of plain black velvet round my throat, told Mrs. Cunningham, who asked why I did not wear my pendant, that I had come to the conclusion that it was too handsome an ornament for a girl in my position, and heard Mr. Carruthers say that the same remark would apply to my eyes.

Sir Jonas, who was going up to town the next morning, was to drive me to the Alders, and then on to Beaconsburg station. Every one made me a very kind good-bye; and, just as I was sitting in the phaeton, waiting for Sir Jonas to take his place beside me, Gordon, Mr. Carruthers' mysterious servant, came up to me in his stolidly respectful manner and said—

"I think this is something of yours, ma'am. You must have dropped it, for I found it on the stairs, and I am afraid it has been slightly injured." And he put my pendant into my hands.

I was so much astonished that he was gone before I could even thank him; and then, turning it over in my hands, I found that the little shield on which the initials were engraved had been wrenched off.

Was Gordon himself the thief, and had he repented? Or had the person who took it been ashamed to restore it in person? Or had I really dropped it, and only dreamt that I put it away?

## CHAPTER XVIII.

When Sir Jonas left me at the gate of the Alders that morning, a sense of desolation crept over me as I walked down the drive.

All the questions which had puzzled me about this household came into my mind again with new force after my short absence, together with others which had arisen while I listened to the talk of my new friends. Was Mrs. Rayner really mad? If so, how was it that no suspicion of the fact had reached that gossip-loving company I had just left? Why had the ladies called kind Mr. Rayner, who always went to church and led the simplest of lives, "dreadfully wicked"? And why, if they thought him "dreadfully wicked," did they all say they would give the world to know him? What was the relation between Mr. Rayner and Gordon, Mr. Carruthers' servant?

I went up-stairs, having asked, in as careless a manner as I could, if there were any letters for me, and having been told that there were not. Laurence might have sent me just a little note; I had been so longing for one.

In the afternoon I was allowed to go into Haidee's room. It was a cold day, and the room itself and the long corridor which led to it struck me as feeling damp and chilly. It was the first time I had been in the left wing. Haidee's chamber was a little dressing-room without a fireplace, and I wondered why they did not move the child, who was really ill, into another room. She jumped up in bed and clasped her hot little hands round my neck and begged me so hard to have tea with her that I was obliged to consent, the more willingly that Mrs. Rayner, who had never once come in to see her child while I was in the room, had seemed, by the way she greeted me on my return, to have exchanged her attitude of apathy toward me for one of dislike. While we were alone together over our tea, Haidee said, very softly—

"Last night that hateful Sarah made mamma cry. I heard her through the door. Mamma's frightened of Sarah—and so am I."

I comforted her, told her Sarah would not hurt her or "mamma" either—though I felt by no means so sure of her good-will as I pretended to be—and stayed with her until she went to sleep.

Then I wrapped myself up in a shawl and went into the plantation to look at my "nest." And there, leaning with his back against the tree which formed my seat, was Laurence. I gave a cry of delight and ran forward; but he only raised his hat and said—

"Good-evening, Miss Christie."

I stopped short, overwhelmed with dismay. Then I said, in quite a low, husky voice, for I could scarcely get the words out—

"Laurence, why do you speak like that? Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Why should I be glad to see you, Miss Christie? I can't hope to show to advantage in your eyes after the more amusing society you have just left."

"What do you mean? What society do I like better than yours?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]