

# 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—

"Yes—well!"

"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 fluttering 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 up of everything she hears. You know what a chatterbox she is, miss."

I did know that; 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. 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 its 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 "gentlefolk."

"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 inquiring 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 scenes 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 had to sleep in that room another night, I should go mad!"

He came and sat by my side.

"My dear child," he said gravely, "you can't do that—for our sakes."

"But I must—I must indeed!" I cried piteously. "You don't know, you can't tell what I suffered when I felt her arm creeping up to my throat, and thought I was going to be killed—I did indeed! And then I thought the stuff on the handkerchief was poison. She says it is only something to make you sleep. Is it true, Mr. Rayner? Here is the handkerchief." And I pulled it from my pocket and gave it to him.

"Quite true," said he; but I saw him frown. "It is chloroform, which she got out of my medicine-chest; I missed the bottle this morning. No, that wouldn't have hurt you child; I don't suppose for a moment she meant to hurt you. But it was a cruel trick, all the same. Do you know"—and he looked at me searchingly—"what she did it for?"

"Oh, yes, she told me! She wanted to get a letter—from a—friend, which I wore round my neck." I felt myself blushing violently, knowing from what I had overheard Sarah say to him on the previous night that he knew all about that foolish pendant. "She wanted to read it, and she couldn't get it without stupefying me, because I was holding it. But I have forgiven her, and promised I would ask you to let her stay. I told her it wouldn't matter what I said; but she made me promise."

"And what made you think what you said wouldn't matter?" asked he gently.

"There is no reason why it should," said I. "But I couldn't have promised to ask you to let her stay if I had not been going away myself. Mr. Rayner, you must let me go."

"I will let you go if you wish it, though the Alders would seem more like a tomb than ever without you, child, now, that we have got used to seeing your pretty little face and hearing your sweet little voice about the place," said he sadly, almost tenderly; and the tears came to my eyes. "But you cannot go to-day. Think what people would say of us if it got rumoured about that our child's governess was so cruelly treated under our roof that she went away without a day's warning; for every one counts upon you at the school-treat, and I believe that our young friend Laurence—don't blush, child—would go off his head, and accuse us of murdering you outright, if he were to hear you were gone. And you would find it difficult, believe me, child, to get another situation, if you left your first so quickly, no matter for what reason. No; you shall have a different room, or Jane shall sleep in your room for a week or so, until your very natural nervousness has gone off; and then, if, at the end of the three months, you still wish to go, why, we won't keep you, child, though I think some of us will never get over it if you leave us too suddenly."

He spoke so sweetly, so kindly, and yet with such authority of superior wisdom, that I had to give way. Then, bound by my promise, I had even to ask again that Sarah should stay, and he agreed that she should at once; and then I, not at all elated at the success of my intercession, begged him to let Jane do as much as possible for me just at first.

But later in the day it was not pleasant to see Sarah's acid smile as she said, when she heard I was going to stay—

"I told you, miss."

And when I said to her, "I kept my promise, and asked Mr. Rayner for you to stay, Sarah," she answered, "Then I am to stay, of course, miss?" in the same tone. And I was reluctantly obliged to admit that she was.

And, as I looked at her face, which could never seem to me again to look anything but evil, a sudden horror seized me at the thought that I had pledged myself to stay for five whole weeks more in the same house with this woman.

CHAPTER XIV.

I took advantage of the rest of my day's holiday to work very hard at the text I was doing for the church. I thought that Mr. Reade might call for it that day, but he did not. And the next day, which was Thursday, I finished it, and rolled it up in paper ready for sending away; but still he did not come to fetch it. Haidee and I did not go out far that morning—a long walk tired her now; but in the afternoon, when lessons were over, I sauntered out into the garden, with a book in my hand, and went to my "nest," which I had neglected to visit on the day before—a most unusual occurrence; but Mr. Rayner had forbidden me to go outside the house on that day, as I was rather feverish from the effects of the preceding night's excitement.

I found Mona sitting among the reeds close to the pond, not far from my "nest," crooning to herself and playing with some sticks and bits of paper. At sight of me she slid along the bank and let herself down into the mud below, as if to hide from me. When the child suddenly disappeared from my sight like that, I felt frightened lest she should fall into the water, or sink into the soft slime at the edge which she had chosen to retire into, and not be able to climb the slippery bank again. So I walked daintily through the reedy swamp which was her favorite haunt, and looked over the bank. She was busily burying in the mud, with the help of two little sticks the bits of paper she had been playing with; and, when I bent down to speak to her, she threw herself upon her back, with her head almost in the water, and began to scream and kick. This uncalculated demonstration made me think that she knew she was in mischief; and, leaving her for a moment to enjoy herself in her own way, I stooped and picked up one or two of the pieces of paper which formed her toys. There was writing on them in a hand I knew, and I had not made out a dozen words before I was sure that Mona had somehow got hold of a note from Mr. Laurence Reade to me.

Down I jumped in a moment, caring no more for the mud, into which I sank to my ankles, than I cared for myself. I dug up the bits she had buried, and took from her very gently those she was still clutching, though my fingers tingled to slap her. I hope it was not revenge that made me carry her indoors to be washed. Then I searched the ground where I had found her, and discovered more little bits, and under the seat of my "nest" a torn envelope addressed to "Miss Christie." I ran in, and up to my room, with my mangled treasure, carefully cleaned the fragments, and, after much labor, at last fitted them into a pretty coherent whole. The note ran, as well as I could make out—

"Dear Miss Christie,—I am so anxious about you that I must write. Is it true that"—here there was a piece missing—"an accident, that you are ill, hurt? If you are safe and well, you will pass the park to-morrow, that I may see you and know that you"—another piece missing. "I shall put this on the seat near the pond, where I know you go every evening."

Yours very sincerely,

"LAURENCE READE."

It was dated "Wednesday," and this was Thursday afternoon; so that it was this morning's walk that he had meant. Oh, if I had only come out here last night and found the letter! I would go past the park to-morrow; but perhaps it would be too late and he would not expect me then—he would think I was too ill to come out.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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