

IN GOLDEN BONDS.

CHAPTER XIV.—(CONTINUED.)

So the next morning, in our walk, I took care to pass Geldham Hall, both going and returning; but the first time I saw no one in the park, and the second time, to my surprise, I saw Mr. Rayner and Mrs. Reade sauntering along together under the trees in a very friendly manner. I had noticed that it had gradually become quite natural for the haughty Mrs. Reade to turn to Mr. Rayner as soon as we all came out of church on Sunday, and for them to have a long chat together, while her daughters looked at the people from the Alders as superciliously as before; but I did not know that he visited at Geldham Hall, still less that he and Mrs. Reade were on terms of such intimacy that she leaned on his arm as they walked along, and laughed as he talked in a much more natural and unaffected manner than her dignity generally allowed.

The next evening I had to go to tea at Mrs. Manners', to take part in a final discussion of the arrangements for the school-treat on the following day. Mrs. Manners, who was a very simple kindly lady, greeted me with rather a perturbed manner, and introduced me half apologetically to the Misses Reade, the elder of whom was stiffer and the younger more awkward than ever as they just touched my hand and dropped it as if it had been something with claws. They were icily obliged to me for the text, and said they would not have troubled me on any account, but their brother had insisted on taking it. Then they talked about village matters to Mrs. Manners, ignoring me altogether, until two little middle-aged ladies came in, who had dressed in an antiquated fashion a number of dolls for the sale, and who, on hearing who I was, seemed rather afraid of me. The Misses Reade were very kind to them in a patronizing way; and a shy girl came in, who was better dressed, more accomplished, and who had no worse manners than the Misses Reade, but they evidently looked down upon her from a very great height. I afterwards found that she was the daughter of an attorney, and could not expect to be so fortunate as to meet the ladies from the Hall, except at the Vicar's, which was neutral ground.

I did not think it was at all a pleasant party. They all chattered about parish matters, district-matters, and the Sunday-school, and the life the curate's wife led her husband—of which I knew nothing at all; and I went to a table at the window, where there were two large albums of photographs and looked at them by myself. But, when Mr. Manners came in, there was a little stir among them, and they all smiled at him and left off their chatter, and seemed to look to him to suggest a new topic; and he said the weather looked promising for next day, and they all flew upon this new topic and worried it to death. Then, when he had said a few words to each of them, he came up to me and asked me kindly why I was sitting all alone in a corner, and sat down by me, and told me who the people in the albums were, and showed me some pictures of Swiss scenery, and talked about the places they represented. I almost wished he would not, for the other ladies did not seem pleased.

Then we had tea, and Mr. Manners made me sit by him. He went out as soon as it was over, and we all went back into the drawing-room and wrote numbers on tickets; I forgot what they were for, but I remember that there was great confusion because several of the ladies made mistakes, so that, while some numbers were missed out altogether, there were a great many tickets bearing the same number. Mrs. Manners asked me if I should like to come up-stairs and see the things for sale, all the rest of the ladies having seen them many times already. So we went up together, and, while we were looking at them, she said nervously—

"You have never been in a situation before, have you?"

"No, never before."

"A governess' position has many trials and difficulties."

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

Mrs. Manners looked at me as if she wanted to ask me more than she dared; but she only said—

"Of course some families are pleasanter to live with than others; but in all these arise occasions when we must pray for guidance"—and I thought of my resolution to go—"and when we must walk circumspectly"—and I thought of the best way of treating Sarah. I only answered—

"Yes, Mrs. Manners"—very gently.

She seemed pleased by my submission, and said suddenly, as if to herself, after looking at me for a few moments—

"An honest open face"—which made me blush—then, in a quicker, more practical tone—"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?"

I hesitated. Nobody ever seemed to think of going to mamma for counsel; we always kept things from her that were likely to disturb her, because she had delicate nerves, and used to go into hysterics if anything went wrong. So I said—

"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 catechising you rudely; but Mr. Manners and I take a great interest in you, knowing how young and inexperienced you are to have to go out into the world alone. And he thinks I have neglected you a little. But, you see, Mrs. Rayner is so very—reserved, and lives such a secluded life, that it is not easy to form an intimacy. But 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 there was a shade of reserve in her manner, and although I did not think it likely that I should ever experience at the Alders any trial that she could help me in—for I could not confide a family secret, like

Mrs. Rayner's suspected insanity, to anybody—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. The two little middle-aged ladies sang, in thin cracked voices, some duets in Italian—passionate love-songs, the words of which they did not seem to understand. The elder Miss Reade played a movement of Mozart's "Fantasia in C minor"—but I did not recognize it until near the end—and the younger a "Galop de Salon," with the loud pedal down all the time. Miss Lane, the attorney's daughter, sang "Little Maid of Arcdee," which Mrs. Manners said she should have liked if the words had not been so silly. Then I was asked to play, and I chose Schumann's "Arabesque," and they seemed astonished and a little scandalized because I played it by heart. I heard Miss Reade whisper—

"I don't like her style. The great difference between forte and piano seems to me an affectation."

While I was playing, Mr. Laurance Reade came in to take his sisters 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-treat."

"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 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, than 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 are going to have a much grander affair than usual, I hear," he ended—"more like a regular bazaar."

"It sounds ungracious to say so," she returned, rather anxiously, "but I am rather sorry that we have not kept to the old simple custom. Still, when Lady Mills offered a marquee, and to come herself and help to sell, and to bring her friends, we were obliged to make a difference. And then the band from Beaconsburgh—" she stopped, for it was old Mr. Reade who had offered to provide that.

"Ah, that's my father's fault!" the young man put in, laughing. "He's a wicked old fellow, wanting to corrupt the rustic simplicity of the parish in his old age."

His elder sister said "Laurence" reprovingly. Mrs. Manners went on.

"And, if Lady Mills comes on the drag, she'll bring a lot of idle young men"—Miss Lane and the younger Miss Reade looked up—"and there will be nothing to amuse them, for we have only one set of lawn tennis—I think we must charge a penny a game for that"—in a practical tone—"and they will expect champagne and—"

"Oh, Lady Mills will bring that!" said Mr. Reade confidently, as if he had been on that drag with those idle young men himself.

"But Lady Mills and her set are not the style that Geldham is accustomed to," said Mrs. Manners, in a superior tone.

"Oh, no!" assented Mr. Reade gravely. "And they will make fun of everything; and the treat is after all for the village-people; and I don't want those fast gentlemen from London to get talking to the village-girls."

"I don't think they will want to do so, Mrs. Manners, I don't indeed," said Mr. Reade.

"They are all good girls, those who will help at the treat—the first class at the Sunday School."

"Oh, those! Then I am sure you need not be afraid."

"And they will want to amuse themselves, and take up the time of the sellers, your sisters and Miss Christie and—"

"I'll keep them off, Mrs. Manners. The sellers shall not be teased by any impertinent and trifling young men. I'll devote myself to looking after them."

Simple Mrs. Manners, who had been in deep earnest all the time, began to have a suspicion that there was a lurking mirthfulness under Mr. Reade's gravity: so she said severely—

"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 all 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'll 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 coldly.

I would not have missed the walk home with Mr. Reade for the world.

"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, and up the path between the laurel-hedges which led to the side gate. The path curved just at the end, and I heard the gate swing

to; but I could not stop myself. And, as Mr. Reade dashed around 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 apologise. Where were you running?"

"I—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 so humiliating to have been caught running to meet Mr. Reade.

"No? I had hoped you were. For I have been running like a race-horse to meet you."

I said nothing.

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

"I—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 had 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 it down, it would read just like the same thing over and over again, and not at all as it sounded to me.

We did not go straight back, but a longer way round, for fear the grass should make my feet wet; and we passed the front gate and went on to the side gate that led past the stable. And there Laurence left me, for I did not want that spiteful Sarah to see him with me. I went through into the shrubbery, so happy that I could scarcely keep from singing softly to myself. But, as I came close to the stables, I left off, for fear Mr. Rayner, who might be in his room, as it was now quite dark, should hear me, and want to know how I got back, and why I was so late; and just then I could not have told him. I wanted to slip up-stairs to my room without seeing any one, and go straightway to sleep with the remembrance of Laurence and his last kiss all fresh and undisturbed in my mind. Then I thought I should dream of him.

But I was disappointed. For close under the stable-wall I saw two men's figures, neither of them Mr. Rayner's, and one of them held a dark lantern. I was frightened, for they made no noise, and I thought they walked like thieves; so I crept in among the trees and watched them. One of them softly tried the door of the harness-room, through which one had to pass to get to the upper story where Mr. Rayner slept. Then they came away and walked first down the path a little way towards the house, and then up it towards where I crouched among the trees. They sauntered cautiously, but slowly as if waiting for some one. I did not feel much afraid of their seeing me, for I knew I was well concealed; but I was eager to get out and alarm the house, and I dared not move while they were in sight. But, when they came close, I recognized one as Tom Parke, Sarah's lover, and in the other, much to my surprise, the gentleman who had visited Mr. Rayner after tea one evening, whose conversation with Sarah in the plantation had so surprised me by its familiar tone.

The moon, which had now risen high, fell full upon his face as he passed, and I had a better opportunity than before of observing him. He was rather short, of slim neat build, fair, clean-shaven, with gray eyes and an imperturbable expression of face. He had an overcoat and a big comforter over his arm, and was, as he had been before, very carefully dressed. When they were just opposite to me, they turned back, and, just as they got to the harness-room door again, Sarah came quickly from the house with a key, let them in, and followed herself. And in another minute Mr. Rayner passed me from the road and let himself in after them. I waited a few moments in wonder at this strange scene; it seemed to me that I was always seeing curious things at the Alders. But I had something pleasanter to think about than mysterious night-visitors, and I ran quickly and lightly down the path to the house, where Jane, very sleepy, and surprised at my being so late, let me in.

But that last adventure spoilt my dreams. I did indeed dream of Laurence; but I dreamt that I was carried away from him by burglars.

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.

"I'll bring two of the Manners boys, and say we've come for the benches Mr. Rayner offered to lend for the children's tea," said he. "Then I'll y Mrs. Manners begs you to come at once, and I'll start off with the boys; and, when we get outside the gate, I'll send them on with the benches and wait about for you."

I wondered why he could not wait for me in the house as a matter of course; but he knew best, and I said nothing.

The next morning I put on a white frock that I had been busily making during all my spare time for the last fortnight, and a broad sash of the palest lemon and pink that I had been saving up for some great occasion. Then I slipped into the garden before breakfast—for there was no knowing how soon after he might come—to gather a flower to wear at my throat. I purposely chose rather a faded little rose, in the hope that Laurence might notice it and get me one himself to wear instead. I was going to put it in water until it was time to start, when Mr. Rayner met me at the window.

"Halloo, Miss Christie, stealing my

roses! Well, since you had resolved to burden yourself with a crime, you might have made it worth your while. But I am not going to permit you to spoil the effect of your pretty frock and destroy the reputation of my garden by wearing such a misshapen thing as that! Never! Come out again with me, and we'll find something better."

This was not what I wanted at all; but I was obliged to follow him, and to seem pleased when he gathered and gave me the loveliest little late tea-rose possible, and then found a beautiful bit of long soft moss to put round it. Laurence would never dare to suggest that this was not pretty enough to wear.

After breakfast, I went into the school-room with Haidee; but I was not in my usually soberly instructive mood; and, when I heard the front-door bell ring, I took the "Child's Guide to Knowledge" from Haidee's hand and gravely held it before me for some minutes until she said timidly—

"It begins at 'What is tapioca?' Miss Christie."

Then I felt ashamed of myself, and, making an effort, heard all the rest of her lessons as intelligently as was necessary, and set her a copy in my best hand. Then, just as I was thinking that my reward must be very near now, my heart sank as I heard Laurence's step returning through the hall, and those of the boys with him, while yet I had not been summoned. I wondered whether Laurence had forgotten all about me, and could have burst into tears at the thought that he would soon be helping to arrange the stalls with pretty Miss Kate Finch.

But presently, when disappointment had given place to despair, I came to what I suppose was a better mood, and reflected that it was all a just punishment for the careless and neglectful manner in which I was certainly performing my duties this morning. And I went into dinner with all my bright spirits of the morning very properly chastened out of me.

It was wicked and ungrateful of me; but, Mr. Rayner said brightly, "Mrs. Manners wanted you to go and help her to prepare for the afternoon's festivities, Miss Christie; but we are not going to let you fag yourself out laying tables for a lot of dirty children, so I said you should come later." I felt for the moment as if I quite disliked him, though it was really only another proof of his kindness and care for me.

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 looked very grave and gloomy, and did not come forward towards us immediately, as I had expected. Was he offended because I had not come earlier? Surely he must have known how much I wanted to do so! His elder sister, much to my surprise, came out to meet me.

"We have been waiting for you such a long time, Miss Christie," she said; "we have kept a place for you."

And, although she did not speak much more pleasantly than usual, I thought it good-natured of her, and wondered whether Laurence had spoken to her about me and she was trying to be kind to please him. I followed her into the marquee, which was arranged with one long stall down each side. At one, cheap toys, sweets, and very innocent refreshments were to be sold; the Sunday-school girls stood behind it, presided over by the housekeeper from the Hall. Down the other side was a stall loaded with the usual display of mats, dolls, crochets, shawls, and tatting antimacassars, with here and there a gipsy-table or cushion mounted with wool-work, and a host of useful trifles, which were expected to fetch far more than their intrinsic value.

But the custom of former years, when the sale had been chiefly for the village people, was not forgotten; and one end was piled up with underclothing and children's frocks and a quantity of cheap crockery and ironmongery, the contributions of Beaconsburgh tradesmen. At this, decidedly the least interesting corner of the whole bazaar, Miss Reade asked me if I would mind standing.

"We chose this part for you, because you said you would like to have plenty to do; and we know you are patient. And I assure you the old women from the village will give you lots of occupation; they always want to turn over everything in the place and buy what they require for nothing."

I think I would rather have sold some pretty things too; but of course somebody must sell the ugly ones, and I really wanted to be useful; so I looked carefully over the things under my charge and examined the price-tickets, which I thought was a business-like way of going to work, when Laurence at last strolled in and came up to me. He shook hands with a loving pressure, but he only said—

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

And I felt so much chilled by the common-place words and the "Miss Christie" that I could scarcely answer. I had not expected him to say "Violet" before everybody, as he had done when we walked home on the previous night; but he need not have used my prim surname at all. But, as he stooped to push under the stall a box that was sticking out, he said, in a very low voice—

"I must speak to you presently. You must make some excuse to get away, and I'll wait up and meet you. I have some bad news—at least, I don't know whether you will think it bad news."

His whisper got so gruff during those last words that I longed to kneel down on the ground by him and put my arms around his neck and tell him not to mind, whatever it was; but I could only say softly, as I bent over a bundle of night-caps—

"Of course I shall think it bad if you do."

And he just glanced up with a look that made me hold my breath and almost forgot where I was, and his lips touched my frock as he rose, and I knew the bad news was still not so bad as it might be.

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 I thought I had never seen any one so beautiful or so winning as Lady Mills herself, with her pretty cream-colored gown covered with lace and bunches of pale roses in her hat and on her dress. The ladies

with her were beautifully dressed, too, and I saw at once that they were indeed, as Mrs. Manners had said, not the style of people Geldham was accustomed to. They made us all, sellers and buyers, look very dowdy and old-fashioned, and they talked and laughed a little louder than we dared do, and moved about as if they were used to being looked at and did not mind it. There were only two gentlemen with the six or eight ladies, and I heard Lady Mills say to Mrs. Manners that the rest of the men were coming on the drag, and that she had given them strict orders that after a certain time they were to buy up all that was left on the stalls. Mrs. Manners seemed rather distressed at that, and said she did not want the gentlemen to purchase things which would be of no use to them; they had some smoking-caps and embroidered cigar-cases, but Lady Mills laughed, and said Mrs. Manners was too merciful; and then she left our marquee and went to superintend the finishing touches put to the arrangement of her own.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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