

Mystery of the Alders

By FLORENCE WARDEN.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

We followed the dog-cart at a safe distance, which was not very far off in the fog, until it stopped at the stable gate. Then we slipped past quite unseen on the other side of the road, while Mr. Rayner was busy opening the gate; and at the front gate Laurence left me, and I groped my way down the drive as fast as I could, and got in some minutes before Mr. Rayner and his companion. And as I could rely upon the silence of Mrs. Rayner and the cook, I said nothing to anybody else about my excursion.

After dinner Mr. Rayner asked the detective if he liked violin music, to which he replied that he did not care for it much, it being rather a scratchy sort of an instrument. "Give me the concertina," said Mr. Maynard, genially.

"Then I won't ask you to listen to my music," said Mr. Rayner. "I'm only a fiddler. However, I think I must console myself for this disgusting weather by a—tune to-night; but I'll be merciful and shut the doors. My wife and Miss Christie will entertain you, and—let me see, it is half past seven—at nine o'clock I'll come and inflict myself upon you again, and we can have a game of backgammon. Do you care for backgammon?"

Mr. Maynard having declared that he did, Mr. Rayner asked me if I could go into the drawing-room and hunt out "La Traviata" and Moore's "Irish Melodies." I went obediently, and was on my knees turning over the great piles of music that stood there when he came in softly and shut the door. Before I knew he was near I felt something passed round my neck and heard the snap of a clasp behind. I put up my hand and sprung to my feet, startled. Mr. Rayner, bright and smiling, drew my hand through his arm and led me to a looking-glass. Flashing and sparkling round my throat was a necklace of red jewels that dazzled me by their beauty.

"Don't I keep my promise?" I said I would bring you some garnets. Do they please you?"

But they did not at all, after what Laurence had said; the magnificent present filled me with terror. I put up both hands, tore them off, and flung them down with trembling fingers, and then stood, panting with fright at my own daring, wondering what he would do to me.

He did nothing. After looking at me for what seemed to me a long time, without the least sign of displeasure he picked up the necklace, slipped it into his pocket and said, quite gently:

"That is very pretty spirit, but is rather ungrateful isn't it? Never mind; you shall make amends for it by and by. Now will you go and help Mrs. Rayner to entertain our lynx-eyed friend? You shall come back and fetch me at nine o'clock. Run along now, my dear."

He gave me a gentle little tap of dismissal, and, rather crestfallen, I returned to the dining-room. But neither my entertaining powers nor Mrs. Rayner's were called into play; for Mr. Maynard was already rather drowsy, and after sleepily muttering "Bravo—very good!" as the last sounds of Schubert's "Adieu" died away on Mr. Rayner's violin, I heard the regular breathing of a sleeping person from the armchair where he was sitting. But I was paying little attention to him. The door being shut I had gone closer and closer to it, as if drawn by an irresistible fascination, as Mr. Rayner seemed to play the "Adieu" as he had never played it before. Every note seemed to vibrate in my own heart. When the last notes of the "Adieu" had died away, I listened for the next melody eagerly, and was struck with a chilly sense of disappointment as an air from "Rigoletto" followed.

It was not that I did not care for that opera, but a certain hardness of touch, which struck me at once as being unlike the rich full tones Mr. Rayner generally drew from his loved violin, grated upon my ear and puzzled me. My glance stole to Mrs. Rayner; and I could see that she also was struck by the curious change of style in her husband's playing. It was as brilliant as ever; the execution of one of the difficult passages in the arrangement of "Martha" was clever, more perfect than usual; but the soul was not there, and no brilliancy of shake or cadenza could repay me for the loss. It did not sound like the playing of the same man, and my interest in the music gradually died away; and, after watching Mrs. Rayner curiously for some minutes and noting the intendment with which, sitting upright in her chair, she was listening to the violin, and at the same time keeping her eyes fixed upon the slumbering Maynard, I gave myself up to my own agitated thoughts. What was going on at the hall now? Would the constables catch Tom Parkes, and would Gordon prove to be mixed up in it? I hoped they would capture the unknown James Woodfall, who must be a desperate criminal from the eagerness with which the police had snatched at the possibility of capturing him. Poor Tom Parkes was probably only a tool in the hands of this monster. And then I fell to thinking sadly of the deception Mr. Rayner had practiced on me, and Mrs. Rayner's warning came to my mind. But it still seemed as though there must be some explanation which would exonerate Mr. Rayner from intentional wrong doing. One does not quickly lose confidence in a friend who had been so kind as he had been to me. But when I realized the nature and strength of the evidence against him my tears fell fast. Suddenly the silence in the house was broken by a howl from Nap. Mr. Rayner's retriever, who was chained to his kennel outside.

Mrs. Rayner started. Still Maynard slumbered. I looked at the clock; it was seven minutes to nine. Another and another howl from the dog, followed by loud and furious barking. We two women sat staring at each other, without a word. I would have spoken; but Mrs. Rayner glanced at the sleeping detective and put her finger

to her lips. Still the sounds of the violin came to us from the drawing room without interruption.

When nine o'clock struck, I jumped up much relieved, opened and shut the door softly, crossed the hall, and turned the handle of the drawing room door. It was locked. I tapped, but there was no answer. He was playing a brilliant concerto, and I supposed he had not heard me. I knocked again and said, softly:

"Mr. Rayner, it is nine o'clock, you told me to come at nine."

It was no use to stand there knocking, so I went into the school-room. It was ten minutes after nine and Nap was barking more furiously than ever. I was so much struck by the noise the dog was making that I unfastened the shutters and opened the window about an inch to listen.

The fog was blinding. I could not see a yard in front of me. I heard nothing but Nap's barking for a minute; then I saw the dim glow of a lantern and heard a muffled whisper through the fog:

"Who's that?"

"It is I—Violet Christie. Is that you, Laurence?"

"Hush! All right!" he whispered back. "Let me in."

He got in softly through the window, and, rather to my alarm a middle-aged man in plain clothes, also with a lantern, followed him. Laurence himself looked more alarming than any thief. His face was ghastly white with fatigue and dirtier than ever through long watching in the fog. He listened for a minute to the violin, then said quickly, but still in a low voice:

"Who is that playing?"

"Mr. Rayner," I answered.

He turned sharply to the other man, who nodded as if to say it was just what he had expected.

"How long has he been playing?" asked Laurence.

"Ever since half past seven."

He turned to the other man again.

"A trick," said the latter simply.

"Who is with him?" asked Laurence again.

"Nobody," said I, surprised and rather frightened by these questions.

"Mrs. Rayner and Mr. Maynard are in the dining-room."

"Maynard?"

"Yes. He is asleep."

The middle-aged man gave a snort of disgust.

"Hasn't Mr. Rayner been in the dining-room at all, dear, this evening?" asked Laurence, gently.

"Not since dinner. I left him playing in the drawing-room at five-and-twenty minutes to eight, and he told me to call him at nine."

"But it is nine."

"Yes. When I went to the drawing-room door just now I found it locked, and I knocked; but he did not answer."

"Will you go and knock again, and say you wish to speak to him particularly, dear?" said Laurence, gravely.

I hesitated, trembling from head to foot.

"Why?" asked I, in a low voice.

"Because we want to speak to him particularly," said the other man, gruffly.

But I looked at his hard face and panted out:

"You are a policeman, I know! What do you want with Mr. Rayner?"

"Never you mind, my dear; we won't hurt you. Just go and say you want to speak to him."

"No, I won't!" I cried—not loudly, for my voice seemed to grow suddenly weak. "Whatever you think he has done, or whatever he has done, I will never help to harm Mr. Rayner!"

The man shrugged his shoulders, walked to the window, whistled softly. Laurence put me in a chair, whispering: "That's a brave girl!"—but with such an anxious, stern face. And the other man came back into the room, followed by a policeman with his staff ready in his hand.

"We must break open the door," said the elder man.

I started from my seat. I wanted to rush to the drawing-room door and warn Mr. Rayner; but Laurence prevented me, whispering, gravely:

"My darling, you must leave it to us now."

Every word, every movement had been so quiet that the music still went on while they opened the school-room door and crossed the hall. I stood watching them breathlessly.

The three men, Laurence, the most stalwart, foremost, placed themselves against the drawing-room door, and by one mighty push burst it open. I ran forward to the doorway just in time to see Gordon, Mr. Carruther's servant, fling down the violin and rush to the opposite window, the shutters of which were unfastened. But I heard the crash of glass and at the same instant two policemen dashed through the shattered French window, seized and handcuffed him. Then he stood between them, white and immovable, without a struggle.

"It's no go. We know you're one of the gang," said the middle-aged man. "Game's up. We've got your leader."

"What leader?" asked Gordon, calmly.

"James Woodfall."

"It's a lie!" snapped out the immovable Gordon. "James Woodfall wouldn't let himself be nabbed by such a you."

"Why not? We've got you."

The man did not answer.

"All his fault for getting soft on a girl. Wish I had her here!" Gordon muttered, presently.

He caught sight of me at the doorway and shot at me a sort of steely look that made me shudder. But I did not connect myself with his words. I was too bewildered to think or to understand clearly what was going on until I saw him, handcuffed as he was, quietly draw a tiny revolver from his pocket and, without raising it, point it at Laurence. With a scream I rushed forward into the room and flung myself in front of Laurence, and I heard a report and felt something

touch my arm—I did not know what at first—but Laurence sprang forward with almost a yell. But he was encumbered with my form; and, before he could put me down, Gordon had wrenched himself away from his captors, and, snarling: "I meant to have done for her!" dashed through the window into the fog and darkness.

I knew I had been shot in the arm, for the blood trickled through my sleeve. Laurence did not join in the chase after Gordon, but tore off the body of my frock and bandaged my arm himself. He wished to go to Beaconsburg for a doctor, but I insisted that the injury was trifling, and his bandaging would serve until the doctor came in the morning to see Sarah.

"Now tell me about the robbery. Did you find the policeman in the park?" Then suddenly I sprang up from the sofa. "Where is Mr. Rayner? Why was Gordon here instead of him? Oh, Laurence, my head seems to be going round! I don't understand it at all. I am getting quite bewildered. Why was it?"

"Let me tell you about the robbery," said he, very gravely and gently. "I found the policeman in the park and stationed them in the shrubbery, and I stood myself, with that man over there, and one other, as close as possible to the back entrance of the house; and there we waited until nearly half-past seven, when a man came up through the fog and tapped at the door. One of the maids opened it, by appointment, as it turned out, for she was expecting him, though I don't believe the poor girl suspected what his real business was; for it was Tom Parkes. And, when they went inside, Tom went last, and left the door ajar. A few minutes later another man came up and slipped in so quietly, so quickly, that we could hardly have sworn in the dense fog to his going in at all. Then presently Tom and the girl came out. He said 'good-bye to her, walked a few steps away, until she had shut the door, then returned and crept alongside the wall of the house until he was under the strong-room window. There were our men stationed very close to that, and their chief, who was with me, crept along easily under cover of the fog, which was as thick as ever, to join them. I followed with the other men. In a few minutes we heard a soft whistle from the strong-room window, as we guessed. Tom answered by another, and we saw a third man come up and join Tom. I was so close that I saw a bundle let cautiously down from the window by a cord. Tom handed it to the third man, whom we allowed to walk off with it—followed, however, by two policemen—in order to watch the further proceedings of the other two thieves. Another bundle was let down, which Tom carried off himself; and then we watched anxiously for the next movement of the man in the house. The strong-room window is about twenty feet from the ground; but the man jumped down and landed on his feet. In an instant five of us were upon him, but, though I think each of us in turn thought we had caught him, he eluded us all and got clear away, and in the fog escaped us. But the man at the window there, who has been so many years on the force, recognized him and identified him as James Woodfall, and I recognized him, too."

"You, Laurence! I didn't know you had ever seen him!" I cried.

At that moment the elderly man left the window.

"It's of no good, sir, I'm afraid. The one rogue's got off as clear as the other. Can you tell me where Maynard is, miss?"

I got up from the sofa and led the way into the dining-room. Mrs. Rayner was still sitting, pale and upright, with staring gray eyes, Maynard still sleeping. The other detective shook him, and glanced at the wine.

"Drugged!" said he, shortly.

With a few vigorous shakes he succeeded in rousing Maynard, and, when he began to look round him in a dazed way, the other said, sharply:

"Pretty fellow you are to be hoodwinked like that, and drink and sleep quietly under the very roof of one of the greatest scoundrels unhung!"

"Who?" said the other, startled.

"Mr. Rayner!"

"Mr. Rayner! Yes, 'Mr. Rayner' to simple folks like you; but to me and every thief-taker that knows his business—the missing forger, James Woodfall!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

As the detective pronounced the name of "James Woodfall," I gave a cry that startled them all. Shaken as my trust in Mr. Rayner had already been, the shock seemed of the whole world to me. My wild wandering eyes fell upon Mrs. Rayner, who sat with her hands tightly clasped and head bent, listening to the proclamation of the secret which had weighed her down for years.

I sunk down upon the floor beside her, and she put her thin wasted arms round my neck and kissed me without a word. And the three men quietly left the room.

"Oh, Mrs. Rayner," I whispered, "it is terrible for you!"

"Not so terrible to me," she whispered back, wearily. "I have known it for years—almost ever since I married him. But don't talk about it any more, said she, glancing furtively in the round the room. "He may be in the house at this moment; and they might search and watch for months, but they would never catch him. But he will make us suffer—me—ah, and you, too, now. You were so unsuspecting, yet it must have been you who set Laurence Reade upon the track."

"Not of Mr. Rayner. Oh, I never thought of such a thing!" I whispered, shuddering.

And I told her all about my suspicions of Tom Parkes, my visit to the hall, my letter to Laurence and all I said in it.

"Mr. Reade has shown energy and courage," said she. "But he will suffer for it, too. You don't know that man yet. He will never let Laurence marry you. Even if he were in prison, he would manage to prevent it."

Laurence then came in and told us they had failed to capture Gordon or any of the others. He would return with the constables and sleep at the hall but Maynard and two officers

would remain at the Alders to keep watch. Then he said, very gently, to Mrs. Rayner:

"Will you forgive me for the blow I have innocently brought on you?"

"It is no blow to me," said she, raising her sad eyes to his face. "That man—my husband—would have got rid of me long ago, but that he hated violence and dreaded it. Every thing short of that he has tried," she whispered; "and it is not my fault that my wretched life has lingered in spite of him."

Laurence ground his teeth.

"The wretch!" he said, in a low voice. "But he shall pay for it now. I'll ransack the whole world till we have unearthed him."

"You will never do that," said she, calmly. "He dares not much for that. He is no coward to lie in a corner," she went on, with a sort of perverse pride in the man for whom every spark of love was long since dead. "He will brave you to your faces and escape you all. But you have done your best. You are a brave man, Mr. Reade. You would help me if you could. Good-night."

She shook hands with him and left the room. He turned to me quickly.

"You must both leave this place," said he. "The long-continued suffering has almost turned that poor lady's brain. But she is safe from that vile wretch now; and you, too, oh, my darling, thank Heaven!"

There was a tap at the door, and the voice of the elder detective said:

"Are you ready, sir?"

"All right," said Laurence; and then added, in a voice for me only: "I'm not ready a bit. I should like to stay and comfort you forever. Take care of your poor little wounded arm. Good-night, good-night, my darling!"

I awoke next morning feeling ill and aroise with a hot, aching head and with my arm paining me not a little. The doctor called during the forenoon and it once ordered me off to bed.

Although my faith in Mr. Rayner was entirely gone my affection for him was gradually coming back. The wicked things he had done I only heard about; and how could the impression so given outweigh the stronger one of his constant kindness to me? And to think I had drawn down justice upon him—or it was justice I sorrowfully admitted—caused me bitter remorse.

Laurence told me, in one of the little notes he kept leaving for me all day long, that it was expected that Mr. Rayner would brave every thing and return to the Alders sooner or later, if only for a flying visit, and that, in consequence, the search of the house which must take place was to be postponed, and the place watched, with as much caution as possible, from the outside. By letting the life at the Alders go on as usual, it was hoped that he might be lured back under the impression that he was not expected to return there. Laurence had telegraphed to my mother to tell her that I was quite safe and the journey put off, in order to allay her fears about me. Mrs. Rayner brought one of these notes up to me late in the afternoon. In addition to her usual pallor, she had great black rings under her eyes and, in answer to my inquiries, she confessed that she had not slept all night.

"I have something to tell you," she whispered in my ear. "Mrs. Saunders drinks, and is not a proper guardian for Sarah. She is afraid of Mr. Rayner; but last night, knowing he was not in the house, she was in nearly as excited a state as her patient, and was very rough with her. Sarah's room is nearly opposite mine, and I opened my door and heard what sounded like a struggle. Maynard, who was in the room next to the dressing-room, either did not hear or did not like to interfere. But now he is gone; and I ought to be used to terrors, but I am afraid;" and she shuddered.

"Surely there is nothing to be afraid of if you lock your door, Mrs. Rayner?"

"I have no key. Will you leave your door open and the door at the foot of the turret staircase? I know you must not leave your bed, but it will be some comfort to know you are within hearing."

I promised, and that night, when Jane came up to my room for the last time, I made her leave the doors open when she went down.

The sense of being on the alert made me wakeful, and two or three times during the night I rose and stood at the top of my staircase, listening. And the third time I did hear something. I heard a faint cry, and presently the soft shutting of a door, then steps in the corridor below, and whispering. I crept half way down the stairs; the whispering continued. I got to the bottom, and recognized Sarah's voice muttering to herself. I would rather have again faced Gordon with his revolver than this madwoman; but I was so anxious about Mrs. Rayner that after a few minutes spent in prayer I ventured out from the doorway, and found Sarah crouched in a corner muttering to herself. The wretched woman started up on seeing me, but instead of attempting to approach me, she hung back, moving her still bandaged head and her one free hand restlessly, and saying:

"I've done it—I've done it. He'll come back now. I've done what he wanted. He can marry the Christie girl now."

With a terrible fear at my heart I dashed along the corridor to Mrs. Rayner's room and went straight in. The atmosphere of the room was sickly and stifling. I went up to the bed. Mrs. Rayner was lying with a cloth over her face! I snatched it off. It was steeped in something which I afterward learned was chloroform. Thank Heaven, she was alive—for she was breathing heavily. I rushed to the two windows and flung them wide open, pulled and bell-rope until the house echoed, and moved her arms up and down. The cook and Jane came in, terribly alarmed, in their night-gowns. I left them with Mrs. Rayner, while I ran down-stairs for some brandy.

There was some on the side-board in the dining-room, I knew; and I was returning with it when I caught sight of a man in the gloom at the end of the passage leading from the hall. He had come from Mr. Rayner's study and disappeared in a moment in the darkness. It was impossible to recognize him, but I could not doubt that it was Mr. Rayner.

Where was he going? Was he going

to escape by the back way? Did he know the house was watched? I made a step forward, anxious to warn him, but he had already disappeared, and I dared not follow him.

I crept up-stairs, too much agitated to be of any use any longer; but happily Mrs. Rayner was already recovering, and the brandy restored her entirely to consciousness. With cook's assistance Sarah was persuaded to return to her room, where Mrs. Saunders was found in a drunken stupor. As cook refused to watch there during the remainder of the night, the best we could do was to lock the door. Happily no harm came of this, and afterward Mrs. Saunders managed to keep pretty sober. This woman having been sent by Mr. Rayner, assumed about the same authority that Sarah had exercised in the house, and suggested that Mrs. Rayner remove to her old room in the left wing. The poor lady came herself to my room to tell me of this.

"Why do you go back if you don't wish to do so, Mrs. Rayner?" I asked.

"I expect it is by Mr. Rayner's orders," she whispered.

And, my strong suspicion that he was in the house acting like a spell upon me, I said no more.

But I was curious to know what was the mystery that hung about that bedroom in the left wing which no one was allowed to enter but Mr. Rayner and Sarah; and I resolved that, as soon as I could I would try to induce Mrs. Rayner to let me go in there.

As I lay thinking of the strange and horrible event which had occurred I could not believe that Mr. Rayner was all bad. How could a man who was so kind have no redeeming qualities? And I, who had never received any thing but kindness at his hands, had brought this calamity and pursuit upon him.

A possible means of communicating with him occurred to me. In spite of the doctor's prohibition, I sprang out of bed, got my desk, and wrote a note asking his forgiveness, and giving him a full explanation of the way in which, in all innocence, I had written the letter which had led to this pursuit of him. I told him the house was being watched, and was to be searched before long, and begged that, when he had got away, he would find some means of letting me know he was in safety. "I do pray for you every night and morning. I can't forget all your sickness to me, whatever you have done, and I don't wish to do so," I added as a last thought in a P. S. And then I put on my dressing-gown, and, when I heard nobody about, slipped down by the back staircase to his study, where I put the note, directed simply to "G. Rayner, Esq.," just inside the drawer of his writing-table and crept guiltily up-stairs again.

That day Sarah was removed to the county lunatic asylum and I never saw the poor creature afterward. At four o'clock in the afternoon I insisted upon getting up and being dressed. I wanted to see Mrs. Rayner to learn if she had heard of Sarah's departure. I heard she had gone to her old room in the left wing, and, having taken the precaution to wrap a shawl round me before entering that long cold passage, I passed through the heavy swing door, the very sight of which I hated.

I was opposite to the store-room door when it was softly opened, and, without being able to make any resistance, I was drawn inside by a man's arm. I looked up, expecting to see Mr. Rayner, and was horror-stricken to find myself in the arms of Gordon, the man who had shot me.

"Don't tremble so," said he. "I meant to do for you before I left this house; but this has saved you." And he showed me my letter to Mr. Rayner.

"Do you know where he is?" I asked, eagerly.

"No, ma'am," said he, in his respectful servant's manner; "but I should say that he is on his way to America by now, where he meant to have taken you."

"Me? America?"

"Yes, ma'am. Miss Haidee was to have been left at Liverpool street station, and brought back to the Alders."

"But I wouldn't have gone."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I don't think your will would have stood out against James—Mr. Rayner's. And, if this letter had not shown you to be loyal to him, I would not have left you here alive. I may take this opportunity of apologizing for having once borrowed a trinket of yours while you were staying at Denham Court. But, as it was one which I myself had had the pleasure of assisting Mr. Rayner to procure from Lord Dalston's, I thought it wisest to pull off the little plate at the back, for fear of its being recognized by Mr. Carruthers, in whose service I was when I was first introduced to Lord Dalston's seat in Derbyshire."

"My pendant!" I cried. "It—it was real then?"

"Yes, ma'am. I had to remonstrate then with Mr. Rayner for his rashness in giving it you; but nothing ever went wrong with him—daring as he is—till you came across his path, ma'am. I have nothing to keep me here now, ma'am; so I shall be off to-night; and, if you care to hear how I get on, you will be able to do so by applying to my late master, Mr. Carruthers."

He led me courteously to the door, bowed me out, and shut himself in again, while I went, trembling and bewildered, toward Mrs. Rayner's room. I knocked at the door. At first there was no answer. I called her by name, and begged her to let me in. At last I heard her voice close to the other side of the door.

"What do you want, Miss Christie?"

"May I come in, Mrs. Rayner? I have something to tell you."

"I can't let you in. Can you speak through the door?"

"No, no; I must see you. I have something very important to say about Mr. Rayner," I whispered into the key-hole.

"Is he here?" she faltered.

"No; he has gone to America," I whispered.

She gave a long, shuddering sigh, and then said:

"I—I will let you in."

She turned the key slowly, while I trembled with impatience outside the door.

When I found myself inside the room which had been a mystery to me for so long, nothing struck me at first but a

sense of cold and darkness. There was only one window, which was barred on the inside; the fog still hung about the place and the little light there had been all day was fading fast, for it was five o'clock. But, as I stepped forward further into the room, I drew my breath fast in horror. For I became aware of a smell of damp and decay; I felt that the boards of the floor under the carpet were rotten and yielding to my feet, and I saw that the paper was peeling off the wet and moldy walls, and that the water was slowly trickling down them.

"Oh, Mrs. Rayner," I cried, aghast, "is this your room—where you sleep?"

"I have slept in it for three years," said she. "If my husband had had his will, it would have been my tomb."

(To be Continued.)

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