

DARKNESS.

BY DORA RUSSELL,

Author of "THE VICAR'S GOVERNNESS," "FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW," "QUITE TRUE," &c.

CHAPTER III.

Both Mr. Yorke and Gerard were in the breakfast-room when we went down stairs. Gerard looked even handsomer than the night before, and he presently proposed that we should all go over my poor uncle's house in daylight, and see if we could find anyone hidden in the cupboards.

We did this. Aunt Sarah, Mrs. Yorke, and Gerard Yorke and myself went that morning from room to room, and from landing to landing. It was a large house, and, as Gerard said, there were closets enough in it to contain a dozen skeletons. But we found nothing mysterious, and nothing that we could find fault with.

It was, indeed, scrupulously clean, and well kept. Mabel Neal was a good house-keeper at all events, and I began to think it was foolish to part with her. But while my aunt and Mrs. Yorke were discussing this point, Gerard touched my arm.

"Come into the garden, Maud," he said, "or rather come and have a peep at the Dere, Miss Denby? At the back of these houses there is an old archway which opens into the woods by the side of the river, and this morning it will, I am sure, look charming."

I followed him, only too well pleased to go. It was a beautiful morning in the early spring-time, and after we had passed under the ancient stone arch-way, which Gerard Yorke spoke of, we suddenly came upon the loveliest scene in the world.

The broad and winding Dere gleaming in the morning sun between its wooded banks, the great trees drooping over its waters, and dipping their boughs into its glittering wavelets. Then above—standing out against the bright blue sky—the grey cathedral towers, and the grey, time-worn, ivy-covered walls which surrounded it, and further away the green woods on the hill-sides, and the ancient town lying beyond. It was like a picture—so still, so calm, so beautiful, and yet so full of life and variety.

Here the cloister—there the town—the quiet contemplative life on one side, and the busy noisy one on the other, and between them the rippling river gliding on in its unruffled way.

I did not speak at first. It seemed so beautiful to me that I could not speak, for conventional words are too cold and tame to express any strong feeling, and somehow this picture by the river filled me with deep emotion. Then, when I glanced at Gerard Yorke, I saw he was watching my face.

"What! not one word of admiration," he said, "for our show view? I expected you to go into ecstasies, Miss Denby—all young ladies do."

"Then I can't be a regulation young lady," I answered smiling. "I am only a country girl, you know, and do not know how to express myself properly."

"Country girls must be very charming then," said Gerard, still with his eyes fixed upon my face. "Do you know many more of the same type as yourself, Miss Denby?"

I laughed and blushed; a foolish girl, pleased with a compliment from a handsome man.

"Which of our authors is it, who says that the smell of the hedge rose is sweet?" continued Gerard. "I agree with our author; I prefer a country-bred girl to a conventional one."

Did the sun shine brighter after I heard these words, and the air seem lighter, and the sky more blue? A strange, new joyousness at least seemed to thrill through my being, and to fill my whole heart with gladness. Yet what had he said? Nothing, I told myself after that happy walk by the river was over, and we had returned together to Mr. Yorke's house to lunch.

Yet the happy feeling in my heart remained. I caught myself singing aloud that afternoon as I went from room to room in my poor uncle's house; arranging and rearranging the old, handsome furniture to my taste. Gerard Yorke had promised to come in about eight in the evening to see how we were getting on, and I had almost forgotten about the mysterious letter of warning now.

"Why Alice, how bright you look!" said Aunt Sarah, regarding me in her usual affectionate way. "Surely the air of Dereham must agree with you dear, and yet I've always heard it was very depressing, from lying so near the river."

I laughed.

"It's so lovely," I said, "I could never feel dull in Dereham, I think."

Then I went out and gathered some of the old-fashioned spring flowers which grew in the garden at the back of the house. Wall-flowers and great beds of lily-in-the-valley abounded here. When I was pulling the lilies, my late uncle's housekeeper came down one of the narrow garden walks and addressed me in tones, I thought, of suppressed anger and grief.

"Miss," she said, "I meant to cut these lilies, to lay on your uncle's grave—but everyone seems to have forgotten him now."

"I looked up hurt at the woman's words. 'I—I—did not know you wanted them for that purpose, Mabel,' I said, 'or, of course, I would not have touched them. I do not wish to do anything disrespectful to his memory.'"

She made no answer to this. She stood there looking at me, with her dark eyes fixed on my face, and her mouth tightly closed.

"Did he often walk here?" I asked, gently, for after all it was only natural that Mabel should grieve for her old master.

"Sometimes," she answered, "and to my mind he walks here still."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The dead are not as far away from us as we think," she replied; and then, without another word, she turned away, leaving me feeling certainly very uncomfortable.

"How comfortable this room is!" exclaimed Gerard: and after we had found the book he wanted, we stood by the fire and chatted, I knew not how long.

But however long it was it seemed too short! The bright fire burnt low before we had ended our pleasant talk, for suddenly Gerard bent down and drew out his watch to see the time by the dying embers.

"Good heavens!" he said, "do you know what time it is? Half past ten o'clock; we must have been here more than an hour, Miss Denby."

"Indeed!" I answered with a little laugh. "Yes, indeed," echoed Gerard. "And what is more," he added, "I have never spent such a pleasant hour before. You have given a new charm to Dereham, Miss Denby, for I confess I was about weary of it before you came."

"And yet it is so beautiful," I said, softly.

"Yes, it is pretty; but a young man needs something more than green lanes and winding rivers, and gray old walls to amuse his fancy. These are all very enjoyable and beautiful when one has a charming girl for a companion, but they grow dull enough to me, I confess, when I'm alone. But—I may walk with you sometimes, and see you sometimes, may I not, Miss Denby?"

"Yes," I half-whispered, and my head fell low.

Then he took my hand in his and pressed it.

"Thank you," he said, "I shall see new beauties in Dereham now—but good-night. I will not disturb your aunt, so you must say good bye for me to her. Good night again." And once more he pressed my hand.

I followed him to the door of the room and then turned back. I had never felt so happy before. My heart was beating fast, and my cheeks were burning. I went up and leaned against the shelves of the bookcase, which extended completely across one side of the room.

I leaned there thinking of Gerard Yorke. I sighed and smiled, and passed one hand over my face, and then set my arm fall carelessly down by my side.

As it fell something cold and vice-like grasped my hand as in a grasp of iron! I gave a cry—I saw nothing—but I heard one single word.

"Beware!" was hissed into my ears as if from the book-case, and dragging my hand away, with a shriek I ran trembling and panting from the room.

But I had sufficient presence of mind not to rush into the breakfast-room where Aunt Sarah was sitting. I ran instead into the housekeeper's room which was on the same floor, and there I found Mabel Neal apparently reading.

"Mabel!" I said breathlessly, "some one is in the library! I have had a terrible fright—something grasped my hand."

"And you are afraid?" said Mabel slowly, and she came towards me.

"Of course I am dreadfully afraid," I answered. "Who can it be? Someone must get into the house! We must send for a policeman—and Mr. Yorke."

"Neither a policeman nor Mr. Yorke can frighten the dead, Miss Denby," said Mabel in a deep solemn tone.

"And you think—?" I said growing pale.

"That the old man cannot rest in his grave," answered Mabel turning away her head.

"This is nonsense, folly," I said, but still her words had a weird and painful effect upon my mind. My uncle had died in the library—had been called away in a moment—his last wishes undeclared, his will unmade! Could his spirit still linger about the familiar scene? I asked myself, and I shivered and turned cold at the very thought.

"Shall I go for a policeman, or Mr. Yorke?" a moment or two later asked Mabel.

I hesitated—I felt ashamed again to send for Mr. Yorke, and if I sent for a policeman what would Aunt Sarah say? I felt convinced indeed that she would leave the house—would probably leave Dereham altogether if she had another fright so soon.

And to leave Dereham now! I thought of Gerard Yorke at that moment, and this recollection gave me courage.

"Come with me," I said to Mabel, "and let us search the library."

But Mabel refused.

"I dare not go, Miss," she said. "It's an awful thing walking about and meeting those we cannot see! No, I dare not go."

"Come with me, Alice," he said, and I went with him, and in a moment or two we were in one of the quiet walks of the still dark woods.

What did he say? Few women could answer this question, I think, when the man they love first speaks of that love. He excitement, the new joy, the deep emotion which stirs the tenderest feelings of the heart, is usually not called forth by many words, nor by words that it is easy to repeat or write.

Half-spoken sentences, and tender hand-clasps, make up most of the love scenes in the world. Men do not go down on their knees now-a-days, or use high-sounding phrases to declare their passion. A few words, a look, a kiss, and the destinies of two souls are sealed. It was so at least with Gerard Yorke and myself amid the still, dark woods of Dereham at that momentous night.

And I was happy—too happy! For I feel sure that great happiness; great overflowing joy in existence, is not intended to be our state here, and that it never continues. We forget indeed that we are mortal in these golden moments, for the human soul is capable of an intense feeling of bliss. But not here—though perhaps in the eternal life beyond—do these moments last. Perchance they are glimpses of Heaven—rays falling earth-wards, too soon to be lost amid the mists and clouds by which we changing creatures of time are ever surrounded.

My golden moments lasted many days. No mist nor cloud seemed to come near me in the first bright hours after Gerard Yorke had declared his love. We were engaged, and when this was announced no one made any objection.

Certainly Mr. Yorke—Stephen Yorke—did say something which rather surprised me.

"Well, I hope he may prove worthy of you, Alice," he said to me, and he looked at me earnestly as he spoke.

Mrs. Yorke was delighted when she heard the news. She ran into our house, and clasped me in her arms.

"I am, indeed, glad!" she exclaimed. "All Gerard wanted was a good, sweet wife, and I am sure he has won one, Alice, when he has won you. Let me kiss you again, my new daughter—I have, indeed, two children now."

Aunt Sarah shed a few tears in her gentle way, and kissed me tenderly.

"My darling," she said, "I pray that he may make you very happy! Marriage is a sad lottery as you know, but if there are any prizes to be had, I hope you've got one!"

So no one made any objection, and Gerard was all love and devotion. These were mid-summer days, sunny, shining days, spent mostly on the still waters of the Dere, where the dip of Gerard's oars, and the twitter of the birds were often the only sounds which broke the slumberous silence around.

Presently it became known all over the town that we were engaged, and, of course, as these things will, the news crept into our household.

In the meanwhile we had as yet made no change among the servants. Mabel Neal was still the housekeeper, and she was a good manager, though her sullen and disobliging manner was not very pleasant.

But shortly after my engagement to Gerard, he spoke to me about this woman, and asked me to get rid of her.

"There have been some strange stories about her, you know," he said. "I advise you, my little Alice, forthwith to give her notice."

His wishes were law to me in those days, and the next time I saw Mabel Neal, I told her that I wished her to leave.

Her face changed, and she knit her dark brows when she heard my words.

"So," she said, almost instantly, "I'm told we are to have a new master here very soon?"

"Yes," I answered gravely, "I am engaged to Mr. Gerard Yorke, and I hope he will soon be the master here."

She gave a hard, short laugh.

"And you wish me to go before then?" she said.

"Yes," I said, "I wish you to go before August, when I expect to be married."

She gave that strange little laugh again, and then, without a word of apology, left me.

I felt very angry. I had tried to be kind to her, for I had pitied her for the loss of her old master, and the changes which his sudden death had caused; and I had often talked of the provision that I intended to make for her when she left us. But her manner had been so rude to me that I could not help noticing it, and when Gerard came in during the afternoon I told him of it.

But he only laughed.

"My little girl," he said, "don't you vex yourself about trifles. Try to look your prettiest to night, for I want all the old fellows to enjoy me." And with a fond kiss upon my cheek he went away.

The reason that he wished me to look my prettiest that night was because Mrs. Yorke had a dinner party in the evening, to which she had invited all the friends whom she thought most highly of.

She was a proud woman, and she chose her friends chiefly for their position. She loved the world, and the world's good name,

and she held her head high amongst those who considered themselves "the best people in Dereham."

Her dinner party was a great success. The Dean was there, and several of the canons and their wives, and a Sir John Tre-lawny, and one or two of the country families around. Mrs. Yorke introduced me with a pleased smile to all her friends, and treated me with the greatest kindness.

The evening was indeed a little triumph to me, and Gerard came more than once and whispered a fond word or two in my ear.

"I am so proud of you, my little Alice," he said, "do you know the Dean has just been telling me that you are the sweetest-looking girl he has seen for years? He says I am a lucky fellow, and so I am."

I felt naturally elated. The Dean was a haughty, elderly man, not much given to paying compliments, and I was a happy young girl, very easily pleased. Then I was asked to sing, and my simple ballad was praised, and another was asked for.

"Everybody is admiring you," whispered Mrs. Yorke; and when I went near dear Aunt Sarah, she smiled at me and pressed my hand.

I remember glancing once at my reflection in the glass, and what did I see? A bright, happy looking, rosy girl, with the flush of joy on her cheeks, and the light of love shining in her eyes.

"She looks very happy," I heard Mr. Stephen Yorke say to some one as I passed him, in his quiet way, and I felt truly, perfectly happy.

At last that bright evening came to an end. One after another the guests left, and Aunt Sarah and myself were the last to go. Gerard accompanied us home, and he and I went into the library to have a little quiet conversation to ourselves.

"Well, my darling," he said, "and so you've really enjoyed yourself? I never saw you look so well! I think I am going to marry a beauty as well as a young lady of means." And he laughed happily and drew me to his breast.

We were to be married in a month from that day, and all our future lives seemed to lie fair and pleasant before us. We loved each other, we were rich, and now Gerard told me I was fair! I was quite happy I thought as I looked up in his face and smiled, and he also seemed full of blissful content.

"And you have forgotten all about the rude housekeeper now?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes," I answered, "but she was very rude, was she not?"

"She doesn't like being kicked out of her snug berth, I suppose," said Gerard.

"She's a stupid, silly woman," I said, "to be rude to me. But why do we speak of her? I want to forget everything disagreeable to-night."

"And she is both ugly and disagreeable," laughed Gerard, "isn't she?"

"Yes," I said, and laughed also, and then we began to talk of something else.

Gerard stayed more than an hour after this, and at last we parted unwillingly. Parted with fond words, and lingering hand-clasps, and a tender kiss. I remained in the room a moment behind him, for I was too excited to sleep, and I went up to the bookshelves to reach down one of Tennyson's poems, to take up to my bedroom with me.

I heard Gerard close the hall door, while I was looking for the volume I wanted. I saw it high up in the book-case, and I stretched out my hand to get it down. Suddenly as I did this, a loud explosion sounded in my ears, a great flash of light passed before my eyes, and the next moment a burning terrible sensation of pain seemed to seize my head and face, and then to envelope my whole being.

I gave a terrible cry, and fell backward. Then the room seemed to swim around me, and the fiery pain grew dim, and all grew dark.

When I recovered my consciousness all was dark still. The fiery pain was still burning in my face and eyes, and when I tried to open them I could not. Then I put up my hands and felt that they were bandaged, and when I felt this, I cried aloud.

"My darling, my darling!" said Aunt Sarah's voice in my ears "are you better now? Oh, my poor darling!"

"Allow me, Miss Warburton," said a grave and a strange voice (which I after wards learned was the doctor's). "Remember," continued this voice, and I felt some one feeling my pulse, "that Miss Denby must not be excited—must be kept perfectly quiet."

"But where am I?" I said. "What has happened? Aunt Sarah, tell me what has happened."

"An accident has happened," answered the doctor's grave voice, while I heard a suppressed sob from Aunt Sarah. "A slight explosion from some cause or other has occurred, Miss Denby, and you are injured about the face and eyes. This is the reason they are bandaged, and this is the reason that you must keep perfectly quiet."

"And—and—my sight?" I asked, almost below my breath.

"You must not be uneasy about that," said the doctor. "For the present, of course, you must not be allowed to use your eyes. You must try to sleep and compose yourself."

"And Gerard?" I said. "Aunt Sarah, does Gerard know of this? Has anyone told Gerard?"

As I asked this, Gerard himself took my hand and kissed it.

"Alice, my darling!" he murmured, "I am here. Do not be afraid—try to sleep."

"But Gerard, how did it happen?" I said, clinging to his hand, and drawing it closer to me. "We had just parted. What caused the explosion? Something must have caused it."

"Yes, darling—but don't talk of it just now," answered Gerard. "Dr. Richards says you must be kept perfectly quiet—try to sleep."

That was what every one said, "try to sleep," but how could I sleep? I was in terrible pain—my eyes seemed to be burning in their sockets, and my head a fiery mass. Turn which way I would the pain was still there, and I groaned aloud in my torture.

I was conscious that several people were in the room as well as Gerard and Aunt Sarah. I am almost sure Mr. Stephen Yorke was there part of the night, and I heard Mrs. Yorke's low whisper more than once.

The doctor never seemed to go away. Again and again he felt my pulse, and again and again insisted on my swallowing some restoration. This seemed to soothe my pain a little; at least it seemed to dull my senses, and yet I was always conscious that something terrible had happened to me.

At last the morning came, and I heard

the rooks cawing, and strange footsteps in the house.

"What is it Aunt?" I said, for Aunt Sarah had never left my bedside.

"A new doctor, darling," she answered. "Dr. Richards wishes another doctor to see you—do not be afraid."

Then the other doctor came into the room, and presently they unbandaged my eyes.

"Do you not see us?" said the new doctor. "Ah no—do not try—I think we can manage to ease the pain a little, Dr. Richards."

"Yes," answered Dr. Richards, and they put something on that was soft and cool, and then bandaged my head again, and all through the day it was the same thing.

I was not allowed to see Gerard. The slightest excitement was bad for me, Dr. Richards and Aunt Sarah told me, and I was scarcely allowed to speak.

So all through the first day of darkness I lay almost in silence. I tried to think sometimes, but my mind was not clear, and often vague and fantastic thoughts passed through my brain. I slept a little too, and in the evening when the new doctor called again I overheard him say to Dr. Richards that I was better—that I was recovering wonderfully from the shock.

"And when will you let me see again?" I asked.

There was a moment's silence in the room—just a moment's, and then Dr. Richards' voice answered in a cheerful tone.

"You mustn't talk about seeing for a few days yet. You are recovering from the shock, and we must keep you perfectly quiet, and your eyes bandaged. By and bye we will take the bandages off."

"And won't you tell me how it happened?" I said.

"Not to-night," said Dr. Richards. "Come you are doing well—try to sleep."

"And Gerard, Aunt Sarah?" I whispered. "Has he called?"

"Every hour, darling," she answered. "But Dr. Richards and Dr. Bell both agree in saying that you must not see him. He sent his tenderest love to you, and has brought such flowers and splendid fruit. He said the last time he was here that I was to give you this rose."

And Aunt Sarah put a flower into my hand as she spoke.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Experience of Mrs. Peters.

Mrs. Peters had chills. Mrs. Peters had chills. Mrs. Peters was sure she was going to die! They dosed her with pills, With powders and squills, With remedies wet, and with remedies dry. Many medicines cured her, But none of them lured her, Their names and their number nobody could tell; And she soon might have died, But some "Pellets" were tried, That acted like magic, and then she got well.

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