

DARKNESS.

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CHAPTER I.

I was just twenty-one when I first saw Gerard York. He came to see me on business. He was the junior partner of a firm of solicitors who had the management of my late uncle's affairs, and he came to see me shortly after my uncle's death.

Before this I had heard the news—news which I could scarcely believe—that I was my uncle's heir. I had never expected this, nay, I had no right to expect it, for my poor father had quarrelled with his brother, and for years and years we had seen nothing of Uncle John.

Even when my father died, and Aunt Sarah and myself were obliged to leave the parsonage, where I had been born, and where I had lived all my life, Uncle John took no notice of us.

Aunt Sarah (who is my late mother's only surviving sister) wrote to him at this time to tell him of our loss, and also that she proposed that for the future I should live with her. Dear aunt said nothing to me (for she is the most kindly-hearted little woman in the world), but perhaps she not unreasonably expected that my rich bachelor uncle would offer her some small sum for my maintenance. But no. Uncle John never answered aunt's letter; never came to my father's funeral; in fact ignored my existence; and I went to live with Aunt Sarah without bringing her even the smallest addition to her narrow income.

She had just two hundred a year, and I think she had more than two hundred claims upon her purse! She had always lived with us, and I believe that she had given away every sixpence of her money, and the years that she had been at the parsonage.

"I had everything that an old woman could want," she said, looking smilingly at me, "as long as your dear papa lived, and so now that he is gone, it is my turn to see that you have everything."

But to get me "everything," this generous little heart had to give up her choicest luxuries. And what were these? Her daily charities, her constant alms-givings. She gave up indeed the only pleasure of her life when she took me, and I am sure I must cost her many a bitter tear, when she had to go among her old pensioners and tell them that she could help them no more.

We went to live in the front street of Biddlestone Village. Biddlestone had been my father's living, and so we remained among our old friends.

But it was so different. We missed the dear old-fashioned parsonage garden, the poultry, the vegetables, everything! It was like beginning another life among familiar scenes, and then the money! Neither Aunt Sarah nor myself were good managers. I mean we had never been used to pinch, and ordered things at first as we had been accustomed to order them. But seven hundred a year is much more easy to manage than two. In fact we did not know how to manage on two hundred. We tried all sorts of economies; we became vegetarians for a fortnight, and were very ill in consequence. Indeed we were always trying to save, and always spending more than we had to spend. When one day the news reached us that Uncle John Denby was dead; that he died without making a will, and that I, as his nearest surviving relation, would inherit over fifty thousand pounds.

"Fifty thousand pounds!" cried Aunt Sarah, turning rather pale after she had read the lawyer's letter which contained the news. "I'm not very clever, Alice, and arithmetic—but that will be something like two thousand a year won't it? My dear, what will you do with it?"

I think I see my dear aunt's face yet, as she asked this momentous question. A little woman, with a delicate faded skin, and faded soft light hair, parted under her cap of washed net, and dyed and re-dyed ribbons. Aunt Sarah was great in dyes. She was always dyeing something, and her fingers were frequently stained with her various chemical processes. She generally wore thin dyed black silk, but she never seemed to buy anything new. How could she? She was too generous to be well dressed, and so gave away all that she might have spent on her own adornment.

"But girls must have dress," she would say to excuse her extravagances upon my attire. Thus, she was always buying me something, and when she asked almost in a voice of awe when she heard of my fortune. "My dear, what will you do with it?" I ran up to her and kissed her dear faded cheek.

"I'll buy you a new silk dress first, aunt," I said, laughing, "and then I'm sure you won't know yourself, you'll be so smart."

But though I might, and did just about it, I felt it was a serious as well as a happy thing, to become suddenly possessed of wealth. For it seemed wealth to me, this fortune which poor uncle John had left unwilling behind him.

The letter which announced this news to me was signed Stephen Yorke. Mr. Yorke (Stephen Yorke), I afterwards learned, was the uncle of Gerard York, and the head of the firm. In this first letter Mr. Yorke simply announced the fact to me that Mr. John Denby was dead, and that I was his heir. But in subsequent letters he told me that though Uncle John had died without a will, that he had intended to make one in my favour, and that he had absolutely consulted Mr. Yorke on the subject.

But before my poor uncle had made any settlement of his affairs, death had stayed his hand.

"My late friend," wrote Mr. Yorke, "was literally cut off in the midst of his days. He died of apoplexy, without a moment's warning, and his affairs are naturally left in some confusion. I have acted as his solicitor for years, but I shall be glad if you (as his nearest surviving relation and heir) will now come to my assistance."

So it was upon business that Gerard York first came to see me. He came to obtain some necessary signature on some deed, and thus he and I first met.

A handsome man, with a smiling expression, and a frank and cordial manner, rose and held out his hand to me when I went into our little sitting-room to receive him after being presented with his card.

"Mr. Gerard York?" I said with some hesitation, for I was unused to receive such visitors.

"Yes," he answered, "I am Gerard York. My uncle, Mr. Stephen Yorke, who has written to you so often lately, requested me to call, as I chanced to be in your neighbourhood. He wishes—"

But I need not write down here all the business details which followed. Gerard York stayed more than an hour, and when he went away I felt strangely unsettled.

For one thing he had been the bearer of an urgent message from his uncle, to request that (for the present at least) I would go to Dereham and live in my late uncle's house there.

Dereham is a cathedral town, and Uncle John lived under the shadow of the famous grey old pile, which stands towering on the banks of the winding Dere.

"Do come," said Mr. Gerard York smiling, as he rose to take his leave. "I must tell you Dereham is the dullest place in the world by way of an inducement. We are the most pompous people there, and do everything with decorum."

"I hope so," I answered smiling also. "We live under the shadow of the church, you see," said Mr. York, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "nay, I may say under the very wing, for unless you are noticed by the dons you are nobody. I am one of the nobodies, I believe; but my uncle, Mr. Stephen Yorke, is a somebody, and my mother spends her whole time in calling and making herself agreeable to the canons' wives and daughters."

"And you do not?" I asked.

"Sometimes I do, and sometimes I do not," he replied, still smiling. "But it is a frightfully stupid place, and I wish you would come to enliven us! Besides my uncle declines to take so much responsibility. You are Mr. Denby's heir, and you really must come to look after your property. There is a great deal of silver and all sorts of valuables in the old house, I believe. So please decide to come."

Then he went away, but his visit made me feel very unsettled. I told Aunt Sarah what he had said, and she also thought I should go to Dereham. Yet I felt afraid to do so, somehow. In spite of our monetary difficulties, we had been very happy in our little house in the front street of Biddlestone.

But still it seemed right that I should go. This money brought me new responsibilities, and I ought not to shrink from them. So I argued, and so Aunt Sarah argued, and yet to both of us it was a great effort to move, and to go among complete strangers. For we knew no one in Dereham, but the two Mr. Yorks—Mr. Gerard York personally, and Mr. Stephen by correspondence.

But at last we decided to make the exertion. We shut up our little house, and took our one maid with us to Dereham, and on a lovely evening in the early spring-time we found ourselves driving into the quiet old cathedral town where poor Uncle John Denby had lived and died.

We drove straight to his house. A grey, gloomy house enough, but at the same time handsome and old-fashioned. It stood in a narrow street of other large and gloomy houses, which were all inhabited by the gentry of the place.

The society of Dereham is essentially clerical, with its dean, its canons, and minor canons. My uncle had moved in this circle and the York family also belonged to it, though Gerard York said he did not. His mother, Mrs. York, at all events, certainly did. She was narrow-minded enough to think that no one could be worth knowing who did not belong to this set. Yet she received us very graciously.

Indeed, scarcely had Aunt Sarah and myself arrived at my late uncle's house, when a card was brought to us, on which was engraved "Mrs. York."

I went up to the unused drawing-room to receive this lady. A stately looking woman, with proud marked features, and grey hair, was standing there, and as I entered, I saw her look at me keenly.

"Pardon me," she said, "for intruding myself upon you so soon after your arrival. But I knew Mr. Denby well, and I heard from my brother-in-law Stephen York that you were expected in Dereham this afternoon. And my reason for calling is to offer you any neighbourly assistance you may require. I live close to you—only one house between us."

I thanked her for her kindness and courtesy.

"My son told me that he had seen you," continued Mrs. York, still fixing her eyes upon my face; "and as I knew your poor uncle well, I naturally feel great interest in you. Anything you require pray send to my house for."

This was the commencement of our acquaintance. I took Mrs. York downstairs, and introduced her to Aunt Sarah, and Aunt Sarah was delighted with her.

"She is so kind," she said, "and it is so pleasant for us, dear, to be well received. I felt a little nervous about coming to Dereham—I will own that now, for I have always heard the people were very proud here—but since Mrs. York's visit I feel quite at home."

In this way my kind aunt prattled on after Mrs. York had left us. Then, after our high tea was over, we proposed to go together over the house.

It was an old house, filled with old-fashioned and valuable things. My uncle must have been a man of taste, for he had left abundant evidences of it. Books and pictures, rare engravings, and antique ornaments, met our eyes on every side. There was a splendid library also, and a sort of chill crept into my heart as I went into this room, for the old servant whom we found in charge of the house told us that "the master had always sat here, and had died, poor gentleman, upon that very chair."

As I stood and looked around, my poor uncle's presence seemed to me still to linger about the room. He had sat there—he had died there—I was thinking, a lonely, solitary man!

"Come away, my dear," she said, "this is a very gloomy room. I like the breakfast-room best I think, and with a light

chintz or two, we will be able to make it quite lively."

I allowed my aunt to draw me away, and we rang the library together; the old servant following us and closing the door behind us.

Scarcely, however, had we reached the hall, into which the library door opened, when I discovered that I had left my purse behind me, which I remembered I was carrying in my hand when we entered the room.

"I have left my purse lying on the table, Aunt Sarah," I said, "and I'll go back and get it." And as I said the words I passed Aunt Sarah and the old servant and again opened the library door.

I went up straight to the table which stood in the centre of the room, and there, as I had expected, I found my purse lying. But as I put my hand out to lift it, something else which was lying close to it caught my eyes.

This was a letter—a letter which had certainly not been there a few moments ago, directed to myself.

I picked it up, and read the address. It was quite plainly written—just my name—Miss Alice Denby.

Then I opened it, and a thrill of fear stole over me as I read the words it contained. They were as follows:—

"This letter is written to warn you, Alice Denby, that you have no right to be here—no right to live in this house, and if you do so it will bring danger and peril to yourself. You have no right to your late uncle's money. It is not yours, but someone's who has a better claim to it. Be warned in time."

CHAPTER II.

I gave a half-cry as I finished reading these words, and as I did so, both Aunt Sarah and the old servant hurried back into the room.

"What is it, my dear?" cried my aunt.

"What is the matter, Miss?" asked the old servant.

By this time, however, I had recovered my composure, and as I knew that Aunt Sarah was very nervous, I answered as lightly as I could.

"Only someone trying to frighten me," I said. "Come away, aunt, and let us go back into the breakfast-room."

But when we got there I thought it only right to show her the letter. She was dreadfully frightened, more so even than I had expected, and at last she insisted upon sending it once for Mr. Stephen York.

"He was your poor uncle's lawyer and friend," said Aunt Sarah, "and he will know if there is any truth in these dreadful words! My dear, I dare not go to bed—I dare not let you stay here—Oh! why did we ever leave Biddlestone? Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" And my poor aunt began to cry.

To please her, and partly to satisfy myself, I wrote a little note to Mr. Stephen York, asking him if he would kindly call during the evening, as a very strange letter had been found in the house.

Mr. York answered this letter in person. A thin, tall man, no longer young, and yet not old, with a high, finely-shaped nose, and with a very noble—almost lofty—expression of face, was presently shown into the breakfast-room, where my aunt and I were sitting, both (it must be admitted) not in a very happy state of mind.

Mr. York greeted us most kindly, and then smilingly asked to see the letter.

"I dare not go to bed—" began Aunt Sarah.

"But sitting up would do no good, I fear," answered Mr. York, still smiling and holding the open letter in his hand.

Then he read it attentively, and an annoyed expression passed over his face as he did so.

"It is an idle threat," he said, looking at Aunt Sarah, "and you must not allow it to alarm you, Miss Warburton. Still of course we must be at the end of it. Tell me exactly, please Miss Denby, how you found this letter."

Then I related to the lawyer exactly what I have written down. How I missed my purse, and how I remembered leaving it on the library table. No letter was lying there then, yet two minutes afterwards a letter was lying there.

"And Mabel Neal stayed a moment or two in the room behind you, did she?" asked Mr. York.

Mabel Neal was the name of my uncle's old servant, who had had charge of the house until we came, and who had shown us over it.

"No," I answered to the lawyer's question, "Mabel Neal followed us closely out of the door. She was not one moment behind us, was she, aunt?"

"She was almost touching us," replied Aunt Sarah, with a shudder. "No, Mr. York, I believe it was a man—I believe that at this moment a man is concealed in the house, and I dare not go to bed!"

Again Mr. York smiled.

"We will investigate it," he said. "Will you go with me, now, into the library, Miss Warburton?"

"Certainly not," said my aunt, "nor will I allow Alice—"

"Nay, aunt," I interrupted, "what nonsense? We shall be quite safe if Mr. York is with us."

"Yes, of course," said Mr. York, "or if you prefer it I will go alone."

"No," I said, "that shall not be. I will go with you, Mr. York, but if Aunt Sarah is afraid she had better not go."

"My dear," said Aunt Sarah, "if you go I will go, but I do not approve of it. I think it wrong, but if you choose to tempt Providence I will do so also."

So the dear nervous little woman grasped my arm, and went with me tremblingly. She could not help her nervousness, it was constitutional, but she would have followed me, I am sure, into a battle-field.

"Won't you take my arm, Miss Warburton?" said Mr. York, looking round, as he proceeded across the hall.

"No, no," cried Aunt Sarah, closing her eyes, "no you go first, and if you see anything—shout!"

Mr. York laughed aloud at this, and at Aunt Sarah's awe-stricken tones.

"Very well," he said, "I'll venture—and shout!" and he opened the library door as he spoke, and entered the room where his old friend had died.

All was still here. The light which Mr. York carried was the only light in the dim, large room, and as he held it aloft there was nothing extraordinary to see. Only the chair in which my poor uncle had died; only the ordinary furniture, and yet still I felt a nameless dread.

"There is nothing here," said Mr. York,

looking round. "May I ring for Mabel Neal, Miss Denby?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, and Mr. York rang the room bell, and a few moments later Mabel Neal entered the room.

This woman had a somewhat remarkable face. The upper part of it was not uncommon—that of a dark-browed woman of perhaps forty years, with dark, but not large eyes, and a sallow skin, and features of an ordinary type—except the jaw. This was massive and determined-looking. She looked a woman of strong will and powerful passions. Yet it was not an unpleasing face; not a cruel nor even a hard face, but a very resolute one.

Mr. York turned round and looked at her sharply as she approached us.

"What do you know about this letter, Mabel, that Miss Denby has picked up?" he asked, with his eyes still fixed on her face.

The woman's color changed for a moment, and then she answered, steadily enough: "I know nothing, sir. I saw no letter, and I followed the ladies close out of the room."

"But you have had charge of the house since Mr. Denby's death? You ought not to have allowed any letter addressed to Miss Denby to lie unnoticed. Someone must have written it, and someone must have laid it on this table, and it was your business not to allow anyone to do this."

As Mr. York thus addressed her, I noticed a quiver pass over Mabel Neal's lips, and then she drew them tightly together, as if she were suppressing some emotion.

"When were you last in the library before you showed the ladies over it?" then asked Mr. York.

"I was over it this afternoon sir," said Mabel. "I thought perhaps the ladies would like to see it as soon as they arrived, and so I put it right and straight. There was no letter lying on the table when I left the room then, and I noticed none when the ladies were looking over it—that's all I know—I cannot, of course, be answerable for unseen hands."

"Unseen hands! What folly," said Mr. York, "there are no such things as unseen hands sometimes. But enough of this. You know nothing of this letter then?"

"No, sir, nothing," answered Mabel, and again she drew her resolute lips closely together.

"That will do, then—you need not stay," said Mr. York. After she had left the room and shut the door behind her, Mr. York said in rather a low tone:

"You brought your own servants with you from Biddlestone, of course?"

"We brought our one servant, Mr. York," I answered smiling.

Mr. York smiled also, and looked at me very kindly.

"Well, I did not expect you to have a large retinue," he said. "But what I mean is, that I think it would be as well if you were to discharge Mabel Neal. Old servants, you see, get queer notions, and do not like changes. Mabel lived with your poor uncle about twelve years, and I have no doubt had lived to make a will that he would have provided for her. As he did not make a will I would advise you as a friend to discharge her—but I would advise you also to make a small present over and above her wages."

"Yes, of course, I said, "but—but do you think she had anything to do with this letter, Mr. York?"

"How can I tell," he answered. "I don't believe in unseen hands, you know, and I thought that was rather a suspicious remark of hers. But in the meantime, Miss Warburton," he continued, addressing Aunt Sarah, "if you are afraid to sleep here to-night will you come to my house? You know where we live? Just one door further down the street—and my sister-in-law has already made your acquaintance, I believe!"

"Oh! yes," said Aunt Sarah, reviving a little, "we were delighted with Mrs. York—so affable. Is—she your brother's wife?"

"My brother's widow," said Mr. York. "She and her only son live with me, and Gerard as you know perhaps, is my partner."

"I think we have had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Gerard York," said Aunt Sarah. "At least, Alice has."

"Yes," I said.

"Then you know us all," said Mr. York cordially, "and we are bound together also by my friendship for poor Mr. Denby. So you will come to my house for the night at least, won't you, Miss Warburton?"

"Oh! I'm sure I don't know," said Aunt Sarah, blushing deeply and looking at me. "Of course—it's all correct—and all—that kind of thing, with such a delightful lady as Mrs. York at the head of your household—but still—"

"My dear Miss Warburton I'm getting an old man," said Mr. York, with a little comical shrug. "I wish I were young enough to require to be chaperoned by my sister-in-law—but grey hairs and wrinkles need none!" And Mr. York gave a little laugh.

Aunt Sarah fluttered and blushed yet more deeply.

"You old!" she said. "Nonsense, Mr. York, I consider you quite a young man."

"But I fear Miss Denby won't consider me quite a young man, though," said Mr. York good-naturedly, and he laughed again, and looked at me.

But after a little more conversation on the subject we decided to go to his house for the night. Indeed, what else could we do? Aunt Sarah declared that nothing would induce her to sleep in the one that we were in, unless a man could be procured to protect us. And it was very difficult to find a man whom we could thoroughly depend upon at so short a notice, and we could not ask Mr. York to leave his own house to sleep in ours.

So we agreed to accept his hospitality. An hour later we found ourselves sitting in the comfortable, well-furnished drawing-room of his house, and talking to him as if we had known him all our lives, and not only for a few hours.

Mrs. York also was most friendly, and received us with great kindness.

"Where is my boy, Uncle Stephen?" she said to Mr. York, as we sat and chatted. "If he had known we were going to have a pretty young lady to spend the evening, he would have been at home, I am sure."

"I'm not answerable for him, Margaret, out of office hours," said Mr. York.

"He is such a good fellow," said Mrs. York, addressing Aunt Sarah. "I am indeed fortunate in my son! He has never cost me a tear—never even a sigh."

"You see she makes him out a paragon, Miss Warburton," said Mr. York, smiling. "Well, however bad we are, our mothers generally believe in us, that is one comfort."

"Oh! Stephen! What will these ladies think?" said Mrs. York, raising one of her white thin hands deprecatingly.

"The truth most likely," answered Mr. York, still smiling, "that you are a fond mother, and can see no faults in your only son."

"That is the truth," said Mrs. York, with a proud ring in her tone.

Just at this moment we heard a clear loud voice singing on the stairs outside the door. "That is Gerard!" exclaimed Mrs. York, starting up.

But the words had scarcely passed her lips when Gerard York opened the door, and put in his head.

"Well, mother, has the fascinating headdress—" he began, and then he stopped suddenly short, for he saw me.

"Gerard!" said Mrs. York, hastily advancing towards him. "Do you see that we have guests? Miss Denby and Miss Warburton."

"So I perceive," said Gerard York, coming forward, smiling, and holding out his hand to me. "Welcome to Dereham, Miss Denby. I had no idea that I should have had the pleasure of seeing you to-night."

Then the story of the mysterious letter was told, and Gerard York shrugged his shoulders after he had heard it.

"A vulgar attempt at intimidation," he said, "There is no one else is there, uncle, but Miss Denby, who has any real claims upon Mr. Denby's estate?"

"She is his brother's only child," answered Mr. York, "and if he himself were not married, and had no children, she is clearly and undoubtedly his heiress."

"Perhaps he was married?" faltered Aunt Sarah.

"No," answered Mr. York, gravely, "no, he was not—as far at least as one man can speak of another's actions, he was not."

"You are not afraid, are you?" asked Gerard, looking at me, with his handsome, smiling face.

"No, not exactly," I answered, "and yet I admit I wish this had not happened. It seems like an ill omen somehow—on the first day of our arrival."

Gerard laughed a clear, loud laugh. "I wish I had anything to be warned about," he said. "But no one would take the trouble of trying to frighten me; unfortunately I'm not worth it."

"My dear Gerard!" said Mrs. York, rather uneasily.

"My dear mother, it is but nothing," continued Gerard, in the same light, happy way, and during the whole of the rest of the evening he talked in the same strain.

But it was a delightful evening. A new joy was in my heart, and a strange, new brightness seemed all at once to come over my hitherto somewhat drab-tinted life as I sat and talked to Gerard York.

He had seen much of life; he had travelled, and had lived in London for some years, and altogether he was different to any other man whom I had ever met. Shall I describe him as I saw him then; as sometimes I still see him in my dreams? No—for I am older now, and my pen would but draw a cold picture of a face which then seemed almost beautiful to my girlish and inexperienced eyes.

From the first I liked him, and I thought he liked me a little, too. We seemed to understand each other and I found myself wishing to talk to him again the next morning when I awoke; to ask his opinion upon a favorite book; to point out to him some especial passage.

Perhaps it was only the old story. Aunt Sarah did not seem to see anything so very remarkable about Gerard York.

"Yes, he's good-looking enough," she said, as we were dressing together before breakfast next day, for aunt had insisted upon me sleeping in the same room with her, "but, of course, he's not to be compared to his uncle. Mr. Stephen York has a noble face, now! He's a good man, I am certain, just by his expression."

"But he's not young," I answered, trying to make my hair fall more becomingly over my brow.

"Not very young," said Aunt Sarah, "but a few years, and even a few grey hairs, do not matter much when the heart is in the right place."

I smiled good-naturedly. I was thinking—"Dear aunt, how funny it is that she should compare Gerard with Mr. Stephen! A young, handsome man with a middle-aged one—but I suppose it is because she also is old."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Blood Will Tell.

There is no question about it—blood will tell—especially if it be an impure blood. Blisters, eruptions, pimples and boils, are all symptoms of an impure blood, due to the improper action of the liver. When this important organ fails to properly perform its function of purifying and cleansing the blood, impurities are carried to all parts of the system, and the symptoms above referred to are merely evidences of the struggle of Nature to throw off the poisonous germs. Unless her warning be heeded in time, serious results are certain to follow, culminating in liver or kidney disorders, or even in consumption. Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery will prevent and cure these diseases, by restoring the liver to a healthy condition.

Elevator Youth (inquiring)—"Suite 16, miss?" Toronto Miss (blushing)—"No, only fifteen last January."

To dream of a ponderous whale, Erect on the tip of his tail