

DARKNESS.

BY DORA RUSSELL.

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

CHAPTER V.

The next day passed away, and the next and I was still not allowed to see Gerard; still not allowed to see the light.

The doctors spoke hopefully to me, and Aunt Sarah spoke hopefully, and I lay still, and tried to be patient, and endure the pain, which was at times yet very terrible.

Then, about a week after my accident (as they called it), Gerard and Mrs. Yorke came together to see me. They were only allowed to remain in the room a few minutes the first time they came, but the next day they stayed longer, but still Gerard went away when his mother did.

I felt, however, that I was growing stronger, and Gerard's few whispered words used to linger like music in my ears long after he was gone. But he did not seem to be well, I thought, judging by his voice, for it had a sad ring in it, and I noticed that he did not speak to me so hopefully as the doctors did.

"If they would only let me see you, Gerard!" I whispered one day fondly in his ear.

Gerard made no reply to this. He sighed, and for a moment drew his hand from mine. Then, with a sudden movement, he bent down and kissed my lips.

"My poor, poor girl!" he said—"Oh! my poor girl!"

"But I shall get better Gerard?" I said anxiously. "I hope I shall not be disfigured?" I asked the doctors, dear, and they told me I would not.

Again Gerard sighed. "No matter if you are," he said, and once more he kissed me, and then the next minute had left the room.

But his manner had made me uneasy. "Mrs. Yorke do you think I shall be changed in appearance?" I asked of his mother a little later. "Gerard seemed afraid that I might—didn't you think he seemed afraid?"

"Oh, no, dear," said Mrs. Yorke. "You must not take fancies into your head. You must lie still, and get strong, that is the first thing to do, and afterwards we can talk about your pretty face."

I tried to follow her advice. I tried to still the anxious beating of my heart when I thought of my looks, and feared they might be changed. But it was for Gerard's sake that I trembled. Not that I dreaded any change in his love, however much I might be disfigured. No, I judged his heart by mine. I knew I would love him only more dearly (if that were possible) should any accident or misfortune happen to him. But still I wished to be fair for his sake—his "fair young wife," as he had fondly called me before we parted that evening when this cruel accident had occurred.

So the weary days passed on, and fourteen days had come and gone, since I had seen the light, when I was told by Mrs. Yorke that Mr. Stephen Yorke wished to see me, as my evidence would be required during the investigation of how the explosion took place, and I was now considered strong enough by the doctors to give it.

I had asked Gerard questions more than once upon the subject. Had they discovered nothing? I had inquired, and so on. But he had always changed the conversation, and told me I must not think about it. I therefore felt curious to hear what Mr. Stephen Yorke had to say, and I received him very gladly when he came into my room.

He took my hand and his voice trembled a little when he spoke. "They tell me that you are better, Alice?" he said gently.

"Oh, yes," I answered, "much better, if they would only take the tiresome bandages off my eyes, and let me see my friends."

Mr. Yorke gave a quick, short sigh. Then he said—"You must have patience, dear child—we all require patience, you know, Alice, to bear the ills of this life."

"Yes," I said, "I suppose so. But you have more questions to ask me, have you not, Mr. Yorke?"

"Yes," he answered, "lawyers' questions. Tell me exactly all you remember that occurred when the explosion took place in the library."

Then I told him, just what I have told before in writing this story; how I went to the book shelves, after parting with Gerard, to seek a volume of Tennyson's poetry; how I stretched out my arm to reach it, and how at that very moment a loud explosion seemed to break almost in my very ears, and a great flash of light to pass before my eyes, and then a terrible sensation of pain seized me. After this I could remember nothing more except that I gave a great cry and fell backward, and that all the room seemed reeling round me.

"And you saw no one?" said Mr. Yorke, slowly. "No hand? Nothing unusual below the book-shelves?"

"Nothing," I replied. "As you know there is a broad ledge between the upper and the lower compartments, and I was leaning on that when the loud noise took place."

"And you heard no match struck? No mysterious sound at all below the ledge?"

"No, none—but why do you ask? Do you suspect that some one was hidden below the ledge? There is not room. My poor uncle's large books, his atlases, his maps, and his scientific books, are all placed below the ledge."

"Yes; but, Alice, it is my painful duty to inform you that you had that night a traitor in your household. The explosion in the bookcase revealed a secret door, hidden by the large books placed upon it, as if on shelves; and this door opened into your late uncle's housekeeper's room—into the room of Mabel Neal."

"Of Mabel Neal?" I echoed, in the utmost astonishment.

"Of Mabel Neal," repeated Mr. Yorke. "The publicity which has been given to this explosion, and the severe injuries that you have received, have brought a strange story to light. A London tradesman—a man of respectability and standing—has communicated with the police upon the subject. He stated that some years ago he was employed by the late Mr. Denley, of Dereham, to construct a secret door of communication between the library and the housekeeper's room. This door, he says,

was fitted with book shelves, and was constructed with great care and expense, under the superintendence and direction of Mr. Denley himself. He further states that the alterations required were done very privately; no other servant being in the house at the time but Mabel Neal the housekeeper; and that his workmen were paid very handsomely, and were requested not to mention what they were employed at during their stay in Dereham.

"And you think—?" I said breathlessly. "I fear," continued Mr. Yorke "that this unhappy woman first tried to frighten you by the letter which she must have placed on the library table on the first night of your arrival at Dereham, and then, as this failed—"

"And something else failed too!" I cried, interrupting Mr. Yorke. "Now I understand it all. Mr. Yorke, I was ashamed to tell you of another dreadful fright that I received in the library."

And I then narrated to him how my hand had been grasped in the dusk one night; and how a voice had hissed into my ear, as if from the bookcase, "Beware."

"This was also no doubt the work of Mabel Neal," said Mr. Yorke, after he had heard my story. "If you had but told this at the time, Alice—who knows—this last and dreadful experiment that she made with gunpowder might have been prevented."

"Gunpowder!" I repeated, and a sudden dread rushed into my heart.

"Yes," said Mr. Yorke, "this ignorant, jealous, and angry woman, dared to tamper with an agent of whose power and danger she was perfectly unaware. My belief is she probably only still intended to frighten you, for she ran the risk of her own life as well as yours by her mad and wicked act. She was found after the explosion lying insensible on the floor of the housekeeper's room, her head having been struck by some of the falling debris."

"And—what else had happened?" I asked tremblingly.

"The wall between the library and the housekeeper's room was partly blown down by the force of the explosion," answered Mr. Yorke, "and the bookcase and ceiling totally destroyed by fire."

"And how was I found?" I faltered.

"I found you," replied Mr. Yorke, in rather a husky voice, "and lifted you up, and carried you from the burning room. But you must not talk any more just now, Alice. After all we have indeed great reason to be thankful that your life was spared."

"And Mabel Neal?" I said.

"She is in custody," said Mr. Yorke, "and she neither asserts her innocence, nor denies her guilt. But she has, I believe, expressed some sorrow for the serious injuries which have happened to you."

"And what will happen to her?" I asked.

"When you are well enough to give evidence she will probably be tried," answered Mr. Yorke. "For the present the statement which you have just made to me will be sufficient."

Then after a few kindly words of sympathy he went away, and I was left there to think. A sudden and terrible fear crept over me since I had heard Mr. Yorke's explanation.

"Gunpowder!" I kept murmuring to myself, and my heart sank within me as I repeated the fatal word.

CHAPTER VI.

An hour later Dr. Richards arrived. "Doctor," I said, as soon as his customary inquiries were over, "Mr Yorke has been here, and I know how I received my injuries, and I wish now also to know their real extent."

I tried to say this calmly; I had fixed to say these words, and to say them calmly, but my voice faltered in spite of myself, and my heart beat fast.

"How do you mean?" said Dr. Richards. "You are improving every day. Your system has recovered from the shock better than we could possibly expect."

"I mean," I answered, "about my sight. To what extent are my eyes impaired?"

The doctor was silent. "Tell me the truth, I implore you," I continued. "Anything is better than this dreadful doubt."

Then the doctor put his hand upon my head. "I will undo the bandages, he said; and he proceeded slowly and gently to unfasten them. Finally he took off the last roll of linen and some cotton wool.

"They are uncovered now," he said: "try to look up."

I tried; I lifted the lids—all was dark—dark still.

"I see nothing," I cried aloud. "Doctor, doctor! am I blind?"

"Have patience for a little," said the doctor. "Lift the lids again. There! You see nothing still, do you?"

"No, no; all is darkness. Oh! doctor, can it be? It cannot be—my sight surely is not gone?"

"I fear it is," answered Dr. Richards very gravely. "Nay, from the first, my poor young lady, I knew it was. The fatal explosion of gunpowder so near you must inevitably have destroyed your eyesight."

I gave a despairing cry—I covered my face.

"I would rather have died," I murmured; "would that I had died!"

"Do not say that," said Dr. Richards earnestly. "Many happy days are yet in store for you I trust—the blind are proverbially happy and content."

But I only moaned in reply. "Always to be in darkness, I was thinking; 'always in the dark—never to see Gerard's face—never to see the sun!'"

It was terrible—too terrible! This was what had made Gerard sad, then—this. "Why did you not tell me before?" I said bitterly. "Why did you let me lie here in a fool's paradise waiting until I could see, when you knew I would do so no more?"

"Because, we feared the shock might injure you," answered Dr. Richards; "but I have thought more than once of breaking it to you. After a little while you will become reconciled to the idea. It is a great loss, but come, you have youth, and health—"

"Always in the dark—always in the

dark—I kept murmuring, and I turned my face to the wall, for truly on my soul had fallen the bitterness of death.

Gerard came to dine in the afternoon and tried to comfort me. Aunt Sarah had sent for him I suppose, for he knew that I had heard the dreadful news, and when he entered the room he lifted me in his arms, and laid my head upon his breast.

"My poor girl!" he said. "My dear, dear girl, and so they have told you the truth? But, Alice—try to be a brave girl to please me."

"Oh! it is so dreadful, dreadful, Gerard!" I sobbed upon his breast. "Never, never to see you again—always to be in darkness—always in the dark!"

"You must see with my eyes," said Gerard, kindly and gently. "I will try to lighten this to you, dear. It is a terrible trial for you to bear—but, at least, your life is spared."

"And you will love me, Gerard?" I whispered. "You will love me the same?"

"Yes, dear Alice, yes," answered Gerard and he kissed me. But in his voice for a moment I thought I heard a change. Just a faint falter—just a little want of warmth—that was all, and yet a fresh pang darted into my heart, and I shivered as if something cold had touched me.

"Let me read to you now?" said Gerard. "It will amuse you. You must not always be thinking of your trouble, dear Alice."

"No," I said, and I lay back on the pillows, and Gerard sat and read to me more than an hour. But I did not follow him. My brain seemed only to have room for one thought that day. I was blind; and in a moment had passed away from me the brightness and beauty of my life!

People were very sorry for me. My dear Aunt Sarah, who had nursed me night and day, would creep up to my bed-side sometimes and kiss my hand when she thought I was sleeping, and I could feel her tears fall upon it. But for the few days after the terrible knowledge came to me, I was quite stunned with grief. I tried to smile when Gerard called to see me; I tried to smile when his mother came, and sometimes I tried to speak cheerfully to Aunt Sarah. But in spite of all my efforts I could not hide the bitter and miserable feelings of my heart. It had come so suddenly—in the midst of my bright dreams of love and hope this great darkness had fallen upon me, and the light had passed away from my eyes forever.

Some very miserable days and nights had passed since I had first learned the truth when one afternoon Mr. Stephen Yorke again called to see me.

His manner was exceedingly gentle and considerate to me. My hearing seemed to have sharpened and grown more acute since my misfortune, and I could detect the deep ring of heartfelt sympathy in Mr. Yorke's voice.

He did not attempt to tell me that I must try to be cheerful, but somehow I found myself talking to him almost cheerfully.

"You have a wonderful power of winning affection, I think, Alice," he said, "which some women, however beautiful, do no possess. Do you know I've been weaving a little scheme of late—a little selfish scheme?"

"Not selfish, I am sure," I said, smiling.

"But it is indeed," he said. "You know I'm an old bachelor. Some day I will tell you how I once had my dreams of a wife and a happy home, and how the early and sudden death of the poor girl I loved ended that ideal household. But I'm an old—shall I console my little remaining vanity by saying a middle-aged bachelor? At all events a bachelor, and Gerard is my adopted son and heir. Now, the scheme that I propose is very simple. This house has naturally painful memories for you, has it not?"

"Yes, yes, indeed!" I said, and shivered.

"It is sure to have," said Mr. Yorke, "and therefore my proposal, which is, that you and Gerard are married almost immediately, and that you live with me. This arrangement will brighten my life, for as my sister-in-law and I creep down into the 'sere and yellow leaf,' we shall have your young voice, and I pray some younger voices still, to cheer our ears. You are thinking of Aunt Sarah? Do not think that I have forgotten her. Aunt Sarah shall be especially welcome under my roof. She is a good woman, and she'll be the dear maiden aunt to you young folks, and help to nurse me when I have a fit of gout."

"Oh! Mr. Yorke, how good, how kind and thoughtful you are!" I exclaimed, and I held out my hand which he clasped in his kindly palm.

"How selfish you mean," he answered with a little laugh, "to scheme thus to add two charming ladies to my household! It is settled then? We can let this house—"

"But Gerard?" I said, interrupting Mr. Yorke. "Perhaps Gerard will not care to have his poor blind wife so soon?"

"Then Gerard would be utterly unworthy of your love, and my affection and trust!" replied Mr. Yorke with some warmth. "To any man with a spark of tenderness in his heart, your misfortune must have made you dearer. No, Miss Alice, I have only one fear about this arrangement, can you guess what it is?"

"No," I answered.

"That you will be completely spoilt between us," said Mr. Yorke laughing. "I am prepared to do my share, and what with Gerard, Aunt Sarah, Aunt Margaret, and Uncle Stephen, the poor little woman will be killed with kindness!"

Tears came into my poor blind eyes, and ran down my cheeks at these words.

Then Mr. Yorke stooped down and kissed me.

"Good-bye for the present, my adopted daughter," he said, trying not to show the emotion which I heard plainly thrilling through his voice. "I shall send Master Gerard to you in the evening to fix the day, and get the two old ladies—oh! if they heard me!—to order the bridecake."

CHAPTER VII.

Gerard did come in the evening. It was late though before he arrived, and I had spent some anxious hours waiting for the sound of his footsteps on the stairs.

They came at last, however, and the next moment he was beside me.

"Well," he said, "so I hear you and Uncle Stephen, have been making various arrangements?"

"Uncle Stephen has," I answered. "I—I—never thought—"

"You have settled it between you at all events," said Gerard, as I passed blushing at the idea that he should imagine the proposal emanated from me. "So when is the

day to be? You must give me warning you know."

Gerard spoke so lightly that I felt a little hurt.

"There is no hurry," I said. "But Uncle Stephen says there is," answered Gerard, with a laugh. "You have fairly bewitched him, Alice. He is not over-generous as a rule, but he has presented me with such a handsome cheque for our wedding tour that we can go where we like, and stay away as long as we like."

"That will not be very long, Gerard," I said, softly, and I put my hand in his. "Your poor blind wife will like best to be at home."

"Hush," said Gerard, kindly and gently, and he put his hand caressingly on my head. "Well, when is it to be?"

I hesitated. "We must consult Aunt Sarah, and your mother," I said.

"Oh, but Uncle Stephen will have his own way," said Gerard, "and he wishes our marriage to take place as soon as you are well enough to leave your room. One reason that he gives is—that that wretched woman, Mabel Neal, curse her! is to be tried at the assizes, and he thinks you should have the support of a husband when you give your evidence."

"My evidence?" I repeated. "Shall I have to give evidence against her, Gerard?"

"Simply to repeat what you told Uncle Stephen," answered Gerard. "You need only be in the court for a few minutes. I wish I could give any evidence that would hang her, though!" he added, vindictively.

"Oh! no, Gerard," I said. "It was a cruel act, but let leave her to her conscience. What will they do to her?"

"Not half enough," said Gerard. "But do not let us speak of her. Uncle Stephen told me not to mention her, I believe. But he wishes us to be married before the assizes—so, my little Alice, you must fix the day."

I did not, however, do so that night, nor indeed for some days after this interview with Gerard. But both Aunt Sarah and Mrs. Yorke seemed anxious that my marriage should take place immediately; and at last, not unwillingly, but with a strange unrest for the future in my heart, I gave my consent.

It was fixed that we were to be married in three weeks from the time that Mr. Stephen Yorke had first spoken to me on the subject. The ceremony had to be a very quiet one, by my express desire, for I felt that gaiety and mirth would ill become a sightless bride.

I can scarcely describe what I felt, and the emotions which I went through during these three weeks. I was sometimes happy, for I loved Gerard so deeply, and at other times my terrible misfortune seemed to crush me to the earth. I could not see the presents which my kind friends lavished upon me; the diamonds that Mr. Stephen Yorke bought for me, nor the bridal dress that Gerard's mother chose. They told me of these things; they made me feel the satin and the lace, and never perhaps guessed what I felt as they did so.

Gerard was very kind and gentle. Yes, let me write this down—he was kind and gentle, and never spoke an unkind word to me during the three weeks which passed before we were to be married. He was not in Dereham the whole time. He went up to town for a week, but both before he went, and after his return, I knew by his manner and his voice, that he was restless and disturbed.

I also felt very restless. Oh! if I could but have seen his face, I used to think—seen it once, only once more! I used to pray that I might see it again, and sometimes in my dreams I did see it—the handsome face that I had loved to look upon so well!

But in my waking hours I saw nothing. Gerard brought a famous oculist down with him from town, and my eyes were examined, and re-examined. But when I asked this gentleman to tell me the truth, he only confirmed Dr. Richards's sentence. I was blind—I would never see Gerard's face again—I was condemned to live in darkness all my remaining days.

But time passed on. By Mr. Stephen Yorke's wish the marriage was to take place from his house; and by his wish also, Aunt Sarah and myself went to stay at his house three days before the day on which the wedding was to take place.

We went on the Monday, and Thursday was to be the marriage-day. Everything was ready now—the bridal dresses, the bridecake, the presents, were all in the house, and no break had occurred in any of the arrangements.

I fancied it might just be fancy, I told myself, that no one in the house seemed in very good spirits, after we went to Mr. Yorke's. Mrs. Yorke was kind certainly, but not so cordial in her manner, I thought, as she used to be. Mr. Yorke was kinder than ever (if that were possible), and he alone tried to make jokes and to be merry.

Gerard too was kind—always kind—but he was unsettled and silent. Thus passed the Monday and Tuesday, and then came Wednesday—the day before my wedding-day.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Epidemic Amongst Fishes.

When fish are affected by disease they almost invariably die; not one in a hundred recovers, and there is at present no known remedy which can be said to be efficacious.

As is the case with the human race, certain fish escape the contagion, and it is a pretty safe rule that where they can be taken by angling with hook and line, those fish are safe to eat.

It is quite a singular fact, that when an epidemic breaks out in any waters, only one kind of fish is affected at the same time, which shows that it cannot be caused by any impurities of the waters or any cause of a similar nature, or else all the different kinds of fish in that body of water must be affected in a similar manner.

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The inquisitive fellow may not be a sadler, but he is always a "why sir?" man.

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