

# DARKNESS.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

It was a sultry day this Wednesday—the day before my wedding day—and a cloud seemed to hang over the old town, for the air was oppressive, and they told me that the sky was dark and thundery-looking.

After lunch I generally used to lie down, for I was still very weak and delicate, and this afternoon (as usual) I went up to my own room for the purpose of doing so.

Aunt Sarah went with me to see that everything was right for me, and to fold a shawl over me, and having done this, she left me to try to sleep, as she was going into the town upon some little errand of her own.

Gerard and his mother were also going out, so I lay still for some time trying to sleep. But it was in vain. The room felt hot and close, and at last, weary of trying to get any rest, I rang my hand-bell for my maid, and asked her to take me down into the garden at the back of the house.

It was a large garden; larger than the garden at my poor uncle's house, and was divided into a flower-garden and a fruit-garden. A wall divided the two, and in the fruit garden there was a summer house, and I told the maid to leave me there.

This summer-house was thickly overgrown with hops, and was comfortably furnished. There was a couch in it, and a table, and I asked the maid to place me on the couch.

I sat there thinking for a long time, but at last the sultry air made me drowsy. I suppose I must have fallen into a light sleep, for I remember nothing more until I was startled by hearing the sound of voices close to me.

I sat up and listened, and in a moment or two became wide-awake. I ought to explain that there was an iron garden seat placed outside the trellis-work of the summer-house—indeed absolutely against it—and I became convinced as I listened that the two people I heard speaking were sitting on this seat.

One of these two people was Mrs. Yorke. It was her voice I heard distinctly as I became fully awake, and these were the words I overheard—

"I pity you Gerard—from my heart I pity you—but you must see there is no possible escape."

My breath came short, a cold dew broke out on my brow, and I grasped the arm of the couch, and strained my ears, as the trembling wretch must strain them who waits the verdict on which hangs his life or death.

"I know that well enough, mother," answered Gerard's voice, "yet, though I pity the poor girl, I think it is a confounded shame Uncle Stephen forcing on this marriage as he has done. Fancy having a blind wife to drag after you all one's days!"

"It's a great trial no doubt," said Mrs. Yorke, "and if you had not been so completely dependent upon your uncle, I should have advised you not to make the sacrifice. But, as it is, you have simply no choice. Truly, we little can foresee the future. I always hoped you would marry well, Gerard, and for this cause, for years and years, I have kept up my position, and humoured your uncle. And when Alice Denby came here, she seemed exactly what you wanted! Young, good-looking and rich—well might I think my toad, proud dreams for you were about to be fulfilled; and now—see how it has turned out!"

Gerard gave a harsh laugh.

"Bad enough for me, at any rate," he said. "A blind wife—a girl who will probably turn out not to have a farthing!"

"And you really think," said Mrs. Yorke, "that the case will go against her when it is tried? You really think there was a marriage—a legal marriage—between Mr. Denby and this wretched woman—Mabel Neal?"

"There was a Scotch marriage at least," answered Gerard, "and that will, I think, and Uncle Stephen thinks, be strong enough to decide the case against Alice. This wretched child of a felon—for of course Mabel Neal will be sentenced to transportation—will, I believe, inherit all Mr. Denby's money—all the money I hoped to make mine when I asked Alice Denby to marry me."

"I truly pity you, Gerard."

"And what makes it worse," continued Gerard, "is this poor girl's affection and trust. But I mean to be kind to her, and as I am forced to marry her she shall never guess the truth. Poor Alice! She's a good, kind, tender little girl, mother, and I feel convinced had Uncle Stephen not interfered—had in fact she been told the truth—she would never have held me to this engagement. But you know what he insisted upon? That Alice should never know of her loss of fortune until after her marriage, and even then he wished it to be kept a secret from her. "Never let her know, Gerard," he said, "she has lost enough; all your life you must never forget that she is blind."

"Yes, he said the very same words to me," answered Mrs. Yorke's voice. "It is a most vexatious business altogether; with your looks you might have done so differently! And that old woman too, Sarah Warburton, coming into the house to bother one! But I shall try to get her sent to the right-about. The only consolation is, that of course now, Uncle Stephen cannot help leaving his whole fortune to you, and he is rich; and perhaps—who knows—this poor girl may not live long. She is delicate, and with the shock and one thing and another, some day Gerard you may be free."

As Mrs. Yorke said this, a groan broke from my lips. My strength had failed me—I could bear no more—and I rose grasping the trellis-work of the summer-house for support.

Then I heard an exclamation, and a muttered curse, and I knew that Gerard Yorke and his mother had seen me.

"My dear Alice," faltered Mrs. Yorke. "Are you there? Have you been asleep? Let me help you." And she tried to lay her hand upon my arm.

But with a cry and a shudder I pushed her away.

"Do not touch me, you wicked woman!" "do not speak to me, or come near me any more. And Gerard—was it you—was it you, I heard?"

My voice broke with the unutterable bitterness of the question, and I lifted my arms in the air, groping blindly with my hands.

"What have you overheard?" asked Gerard's voice, almost defiantly. "Answer me, Alice?" And he roughly grasped me by the arm.

"Enough!" I answered, "enough! You are free, Gerard—free from the poor blind girl—Oh! Heaven help me! Heaven help me!"

As I uttered these last words, wild and passionate sobs almost choked me.

"Hush!" said Gerard, "hush, for Heaven sake—here is my uncle—would you ruin me?"

He hissed the last words in my ear, but I did not heed them. My brain was reeling, and wild despair was in my heart, and I cried out in my anguish.

"Mr. Yorke! Mr. Yorke! come to me, come to me!" I cried, and the next moment I heard Mr. Yorke's firm footstep approach.

"What is this?" he asked, sternly. "What extraordinary scene have I interrupted?" Alice, my child, what is the matter with you?" And he took my hand in his.

"Take me away!" I said, clinging to him. "I know all now—know that I am penniless—that you forced Gerard to marry me. Take me away—take me away to die!"

With some such mad and anguished words as these I clung to Mr. Yorke, who now put his arm round me, and held me up.

"Gerard, answer me," I heard him say the next minute, "what have you done to this poor girl? What have you told her?"

"My dear Stephen—" began Mrs. Yorke.

"I want no explanation from you, Margaret," interrupted Mr. Yorke, yet more sternly. "Gerard, if you have any manhood, any truth in you, answer my question. How is it that I find this poor girl on the eve of her wedding-day in such distress as this?"

"Then Gerard answered.

"Well, uncle," he said, "my mother and I were talking about Mabel Neal's trial, and her claims upon Mr. Denby's property, and we talked foolishly, perhaps, and Alice, who was in the summer-house unknown to us, overheard, I suppose, part of our conversation, and misunderstood it."

"That is enough, Gerard," I heard Mr. Yorke say next, "Your face tells the rest. I made no answer; no denial, to Gerard's words. I felt only at that moment that the cruel truth which I had overheard had killed me, and to hide myself away to die was the one thought that filled my mind."

"Take me away; take me to Aunt Sarah—to Biddlestone; anywhere from here," I kept murmuring, and Mr. Yorke answered—

"Yes, Alice, dear child, I will take you. Lean on me, my dear; lean, and try to walk."

I did try to walk. I remember straining the utmost powers of my trembling limbs to do so, but after I had struggled on a few steps I could go no further, and sank down like a dead thing by Mr. Yorke's side.

After this, a long elapse of memory and reason came to me. But through all my fevered dreams, through all the fantastic fancies which darted through my brain, an infinite sense of pain never left me. This seemed to reverberate through everything, and never for an instant did the dark shadow of my grief leave me.

The snow was lying on the grey cathedral dome, and the air was chill with the breath of early winter, when I again knew those around me, and gradually began to realise—as I lay there in unchanging darkness—all that had happened to me since your bright spring morning, when I had first walked with Gerard by the shining waters of the Dere.

I was afraid to speak at first. I had recognized two familiar voices too, and I was afraid to ask questions.

But one day when I put out my hand with a restless sigh, I felt it gently taken in a strong, firm, cool clasp.

"Alice," said Mr. Yorke's voice, "do you know me my child?"

Then I spoke.

"Yes," I said, "you are Mr. Yorke—Stephen Yorke?"

"Yes, Stephen Yorke," he repeated, "and this is a bright day to me, Alice when I hear your voice again."

"I have been very ill," I answered, "but I remember now. I remember Gerard's words and his mother's words. Gerard never loved me, Mr. Yorke?"

"No," said Mr. Yorke's grave voice, "for had he done so he would have loved you more dearly in your blindness and sorrow. Love changes not with the passing troubles of time."

"It was strange," I said wistfully, "for I loved him so dearly. Is he well?"

"As far as I know he is," answered Mr. Yorke. "But Alice—that day, when I learned his baseness from his own lips, he left my house. He has left Dereham for good."

"Oh! Mr. Yorke?"

"Yes," continued Mr. Yorke, "and his mother has gone with him. They are not however without means, for I had taken Gerard into partnership in my business, and given him a small share. This I purchased back again from him, and with this sum of ready money, he has left Dereham. He came to me penniless—his father ruined himself by a fatal propensity, and when Gerard and his mother entered this house they were absolutely dependent upon me. Thus he had left Dereham better off than he came, by several thousands, and my conscience is at rest concerning him. But his company I could not have endured!"

"And you did this for my sake?" I said, and I sighed.

"I did it, because it was right," answered Mr. Yorke; and then he changed the conversation, and began talking to Aunt Sarah, and I lay there, in darkness and in silence, thinking—thinking of the past!

They did not tell me everything at first, but by degrees. Gradually, then, I learned that Mrs. Yorke had quitted Stephen Yorke's house most unwillingly; that she had begged and prayed, even on her knees,

to be allowed to remain. But Mr. Yorke had continued firm.

"You must go," he said, and she was forced to go, and she and Gerard had a bitter quarrel before they left.

During the mutual recrimination which had been exchanged between them, Gerard had blamed his mother for first inducing him to ask me to be his wife merely for the sake of my supposed fortune, and he had told his uncle the truth of what had passed between his mother and himself outside the summer-house, and had expressed great contrition for having caused me such bitter pain.

It was Aunt Sarah who told me all this; and how Mr. Yorke had formally asked her to remain in his house; and how he had made his will, and left everything he possessed to me.

"I adopted her," he told Aunt Sarah, when she was engaged to Gerard, but I did not adopt her for Gerard's sake, but for her own. And now when Gerard had acted like a scoundrel, she has become dearer to me than before."

So I lay through long days of darkness and stillness. I knew I was at home. I had one faithful friend that change had not changed, and trouble had drawn closer, and as time went on this thought grew very sweet to my heart.

For my supposed fortune from poor Uncle John Denby had vanished away. He had married—been married for years before—to his housekeeper, Mabel Neal. But he had made her swear a solemn oath that she would never reveal this. This oath Mabel had kept until she found herself in a prison cell for causing the explosion which had deprived me of my sight.

Then she sent for Mr. Yorke and told her story. By her account she and Uncle John were married in Scotland, and she had letters in which he addressed her, as his "dear wife." But as years went on his affection for her seemed to have cooled or changed, and he insisted upon her swearing that she never would declare their marriage.

She was an ignorant woman, ignorant and passionate, and felt great, and not unnatural, anger, when she heard I was Uncle John's heiress, and she determined to frighten me out of his house.

She dare not tell of her marriage, she said, for fear that his spirit would return and reproach her for breaking her oath; but the secret doorway which he had caused to be constructed during his lifetime between his library and the housekeeper's room, afforded her the means of terrifying me.

Then, when she heard I was going to marry Gerard Yorke she grew desperate. She had seen poor Uncle John use gunpowder in very small quantities, and she knew it exploded; and knew also where he had kept some among his stores. But she had no knowledge of its power, and without this knowledge she had placed the canister which contained it between the secret door of communication that connected her own room and the library.

This secret door being thus partly ajar, she had overheard Gerard and myself talking disparagingly of her on the night after Mrs. Yorke's dinner party; and in her passion she had flung a piece of lighted paper into the canister containing the gunpowder!

Gerard must have left the house when she was actually seeking and lighting the paper, for she told Mr. Yorke that she believed he was still with me when she committed her murderous act.

Acting upon her information Mr. Yorke had investigated the truth of her supposed marriage with Uncle John Denby. Mr. Yorke at first did not believe her assertions, because Uncle John had told him that he wished and intended to make his brother's only child his heiress.

But he believed after his researches that this Scotch marriage, which had undoubtedly passed between them, would hold good in law, and that the one child which had been born to them would prove to be the legal heir of Uncle John's property.

In the meanwhile Mabel Neal lay in prison, her trial having been postponed on account of my illness, as my evidence was considered essential to her conviction.

All this Mr. Yorke or Aunt Sarah told me. It was Aunt Sarah who told me that Mr. Yorke had made his will, leaving me everything, and Mr. Yorke, I think, told me all about the unhappy woman, Mabel Neal.

He told me, also, that she had expressed deep contrition and regret, when she heard that her mad act had destroyed my sight. She had asked even to see me, but this Mr. Yorke had declined. She also had expressed great anxiety and affection for her only child. This boy, a little fellow of some five years of age, she had placed out to nurse in one of the colliery villages round Dereham.

He had been brought more than once to her cell to see her, and it was said that her meetings and partings with her child were very affecting.

She was to be tried at the Spring assizes, and after her fate was decided the legality of Uncle John Denby's marriage was also to be decided. But Mr. Yorke did not deceive me. He told me all the eminent counsel that he had consulted gave it as their opinion that the marriage would hold good.

Mr. Yorke, however, considered it his duty to dispute it. My interests, he said, demanded this, and also he went upon the declared wish of his late friend; my uncle having more than once expressed his intention of making a will and leaving his whole fortune to me.

## CHAPTER IX.

The winter passed away very quietly. Aunt Sarah had made many friends by this time in Dereham, and all Mr. Yorke's friends were very kind to me.

People felt sorry for me, I think, and Aunt Sarah told me that Gerard's conduct was universally condemned. And for Aunt Sarah's sake, and Mr. Yorke's sake, I tried to bear my burdens patiently.

They were both so good to me that I would indeed be ungrateful if I had selfishly added to their anxiety about me. So I tried to smile when I heard their footsteps, and by-and-bye this grew more easy to me. I grew reconciled also to my blindness, for Aunt Sarah's tender hand was ever near me to direct my steps.

So when the spring time came, though I could not see the buds breaking into green leaves, nor the sunshine falling on the placid waters of the Dere, I could still feel its warmth, and hear the birds singing in their joy.

Then came the day—a day to which I had looked forward with much dread—when I had to appear in court, and give my evidence at the trial of Mabel Neal.

Mr. Yorke led me in, and I heard a murmur of sympathy all around when I appear-

ed. Mabel Neal was defended, but the barrister who had undertaken her case, declined to cross-question me.

Thus I had, of course, only a few words to say, and told in court exactly what I have written down about the explosion. After I had given my evidence Mr. Yorke wished to take me away, but I asked to remain a short time longer.

But I was sorry afterwards that I had done this, for in eloquent and touching language the judge summed up, pointing out with peculiar vigour and pathos the terrible loss, which I, "a young and innocent girl," he called me, had sustained by the prisoner's act.

Before he had finished his speech, I whispered to Mr. Yorke to lead me out of court. I felt indeed that I could no longer endure the strain upon my nerves; and as Mr. Yorke led me away again a murmur of sympathy was heard around.

Mr. Yorke returned to the Court after having taken me home, and I did not know the result of the trial until the evening. Then I heard it. Mabel Neal was declared guilty, and had been sentenced to ten years' penal servitude.

"But I have something very strange to tell you about this woman," said Mr. Yorke. "After her sentence, and after her removal from the court, she sent a very pressing message by one of the officials that she wished to see me. I accordingly proceeded to her cell, and found her in bitter—almost uncontrollable—grief. 'My boy! my boy!' she kept repeating, walking up and down the cell like a caged lioness. 'Who will look after my poor boy?'"

"I was touched with her grief," continued Mr. Yorke, and promised that no wrong at least should be done to her child, if I could help it. Then, with sudden passion, she fell down on her knees before me. 'Sir,' she said, 'sir, I believe you are a good and merciful man, and as you hope for mercy will you promise me to look after my boy after they have taken me away? And one thing more,' she continued, 'let me look on the face again of her whom I have so deeply injured, and beg on my knees for a word of pardon from Miss Alice Denby's lips?'"

"Alice," went on Mr. Yorke, "will you be angry when I tell you that I did promise that you should see her—and something more. I said I knew your heart, and that I felt sure that you—because she had wronged you so cruelly—would see after her child! Alice, forgive me if I have done wrong," and Mr. Yorke took my hand, "but you are one of those whom I believe will try to obey the Divine command and feed your enemy, and this unhappy woman is hungering with anxiety for the future of her child."

"I will go," I said. "When shall I go—to-night?"

"Not to-night," answered Mr. Yorke, gently. "We will go to-morrow."

And so the next morning, when the sun was shining outside, and the birds twittering, Mr. Yorke took me to the gaol.

A chill, cold place! I felt myself shiver as I entered it, and I clung closer to Mr. Yorke's arm.

"Are you afraid?" he said.

"No," I answered, "not afraid, but the misery beneath the walls seems to cast a chill over my heart."

Then we were ushered into Mabel Neal's cell, and for a moment there was silence after we had entered it.

"I have brought Miss Denby, you see, Mabel," an instant later, said Mr. Yorke's grave sweet voice; and upon this with a cry and sob, the woman fell down on her knees before me, and grasped both my hands.

"Forgive me!" she sobbed out. "I have blinded you, I have spoiled your life, but have mercy!"

"I forgive you, freely," I answered. "If it were in my power I would make you free to-day. As it is not, and as I am told you wish me to do so, I will look after your child to the very best of my power, when you are away."

In passionate words of gratitude and self-reproach she listened to me. She seemed, indeed, almost overwhelmed with grief and shame.

"Oh, Miss," she said, "I must have been mad, I think, when I lifted my hand to hurt you! But I was mad; driven mad by one who ought to have loved me well! For Miss your uncle had loved me long before he died, and he wished to hide me and my babe away for ever. But the lad is his lawful child, for we were married, though he was ashamed to own it, either in his lifetime, or after he was dead!"

Again, I promised to take care of the child; of the little cousin, whom I had found so strangely.

"And—and—" wept the poor mother, "don't bring him up to hate me. When I am far away tell him of his poor, poor mother, who sinned so badly for his sake—for Miss, I thought if I could have frightened you away from the old house, that I might have taken my little lad to live with me there. I never meant to do you the harm I did—never, never."

"I have forgiven you," I said again, and then I asked her where her child was living at the present time.

It was at a colliery village called Redcliffe, situated about a mile from Dereham, and here she had placed her little boy with one of the collier's wives. I promised to go to see him on the following day, and this evoked a fresh burst of tears and anguish from the unhappy prisoner.

"Oh? Mr. Yorke," she said, "Please ask them to let me see my little lad again before I go! I am told they will take me away the day after to-morrow! Oh! Miss, for mercy's sake, ask them to let me see my boy again!"

Mr. Yorke at once promised to do this and then we took leave of her; but I paused a moment behind to whisper a word of comfort in her ear.

"I will see your child to-morrow morning," I said, "and in the afternoon I will come to see you again, and if I am allowed to do so, I shall bring the boy with me."

She clasped my hands, and kissed them passionately, while her hot tears rained down upon them.

"She would have been a good woman I think," said Mr. Yorke thoughtfully, as we left the prison walls, "if she had been better treated and better taught. Your poor uncle, Alice, indirectly caused this woman's crime."

The next morning was a fine one, and upon my expressing a wish to do so, Mr. Yorke agreed that we should walk by the river-side all the way to Redcliffe.

This is a lovely walk, and in the old, old days, sometimes Gerard and myself had gone there, and I thought of this as I

walked on almost silently by Mr. Yorke's side.

But I could think of these days calmly now. I had lost Gerard, who had never truly loved me, for true love would not have changed as his had done, and I had now a faithful friend. If I could only see again—and I sighed when I remembered that this could never be.

"Why do you sigh, Alice?" asked Mr. Yorke's grave gentle voice.

I did not answer and my head fell low.

"Do you still regret, Gerard?" the next moment said Mr. Yorke.

"No," I answered, but I felt that my voice faltered, "I—I—was thinking of my sight."

"My dear," said Mr. Yorke, softly, "let me see for you? Have you not Aunt Sarah's eyes and mine always at your service?"

I smiled. "Tell me, then," I said, "about the river. Is the sunlight dancing upon it, Mr. Yorke?"

Then he described the scene around us to me, and as he talked I forgot that I was blind. I forgot the dark days when Hope had turned her bright face from me, and when Despair had cast her dark wing over my soul. I was content now, I thought, and I listened well pleased at Mr. Yorke's kind and graphic words.

I was not tired when we reached Redcliffe, and wished the way had been longer.

"What a change is here!" said Yorke. "Now, Alice, we have left the lovely country behind us and have entered a dirty, disorderly colliery village!"

I could feel the change in the atmosphere at once. I could smell the coal dust, and the open drains.

"What a place for a woman to choose to rear a child in!" said Mr. Yorke, as he directed me to pick my steps along the rough and uneven way.

Then we came to the row of small uniform houses where the miners lived. Here Mr. Yorke made inquiries for Mabel Neal's child.

"Ay," answered the woman he asked, "that's her that was tried at the Courts the 'other day, and got ten years for blowing up her master's house. Her bairn lives at Margaret Greys—yon's the house."

Picking our steps through the mud, we reached the house she indicated. The door was open, Mr. Yorke said, and one or two women were standing about it.

"Does a child—the child of Mabel Neal live here?" said Mr. Yorke.

"Poor bairn! poor bairn!" answered the woman he had addressed, shaking her head.

"Does it live here?" repeated Mr. Yorke.

"It's just drawing its last gasps," said the woman, "It took the croup at six this morning—he'll tell you better than I can."

"Is the gentleman inquiring after Mabel Neal's child?" then said a masculine voice (the doctor's). "Ah, Mr. Yorke," he added. "I saw you in court the other day. This is a sad case, isn't it? Mabel Neal's child is dying."

"Is there no hope?" I asked, breathlessly. "Oh! poor child, surely there is some hope?"

"I fear not," answered the doctor. "But allow me to lead you in? Poor little fellow! he's a beautiful child!"

A golden-head, lovely boy, Mr. Yorke told me afterwards, was lying on a woman's knee as we entered the cottage, gasping his few last breaths away.

Each gasp was a sob, and guided by that painful breathing, and by the doctor's hand, I approached the child.

Suddenly, as I did so, it started up.

"Mummy! mummy!" it cried, and held out its little arms.

I took it in mine, and laid its head upon my breast.

"Mummy, mummy," it repeated, "I can't breathe—lift me up—mummy!" And with this last word hanging on its lips it shivered and died.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

## Why Laura Lost Her Beau.

Laura once had an affluent beau,  
Who called twice a fortnight or so,  
Now she sits, Sunday eve,  
All lonely to grieve,  
Oh, where is her recreant beau,  
And why did he leave Laura so?

Why, he saw that Laura was a languishing, delicate girl, subject to sick headaches, sensitive nerves and uncertain tempers; and knowing what a life-long trouble is a fretful, sickly wife, he transferred his attentions to her cheerful, healthy cousin, Ellen.

The secret is that Laura's health and strength are sapped by chronic weakness, peculiar to her sex, which Ellen averts and avoids by the use of Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription. This is the only remedy, for woman's peculiar weaknesses and ailments, sold by druggists, under a positive guarantee from the manufacturers, that it will give satisfaction in every case or money will be refunded. See guarantee on bottle wrapper.

Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string.