

THE BLINDNESS OF DR. GRAY

By Rev. P. A. SHEPHERD, D. D. Author of "My New Curate," "Lake Delinze," "Lilies," "Glennan," etc.

CHAPTER XLII

A QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER. Doubting, wondering, puzzled, pushing forward in the darkness toward Crossfields, then suddenly retracing his footsteps, angry, yet pleased, vindictive but forgiving, Dick Duggan went away at last to the little "screen" of shrubbery at the rear of the Kerins house. The night was pitch dark, but the whole yard between the screen and the house was illuminated with a flood of light from the open door of the kitchen, where lamps were burning and a mighty fire was blazing, and all the hurry and bustle of a great entertainment showed that this was the centre of the evening's hospitality. Across the glow of light that shone through the door, Dick figures came and went, and the servants rubbed the yard for fire-wood, or turf, or hung out dirty water, or useless remnants of vegetables. But there was always a jest and a laugh, a tiny echo of the hilarious merriment that proceeded within the house.

For some time Dick Duggan waited and watched, growing ever more angry and impatient, as he contrasted his own loneliness and the dark and gloomy cabin he had left with all this brightness and tumultuous rejoicing. Once or twice the thought occurred that the gypsy girl had made a fool of him, and was now probably laughing at him as a victim of a cruel joke. But he argued that this was impossible and that the girl, altogether independently of her fear of him, could have no motive whatsoever for playing such a foolish and cruel prank.

At last he was not to go away and return to his home with no pleasant feelings in his heart, when a slight figure, quite unlike the sturdy forms of the servants, appeared at the door. He knew instantly who it was and moved a little forward. The figure passed into the darkness of the yard, and very soon he heard a light footfall near him on the dry needles of the trees. He stood motionless, and after a pause long and painful he heard his name whispered in the darkness. He waited for a repetition of it and then stepped forward and confronted the girl.

"Well!" he said. "I'm here!"

"Dick!" she said. "Is that you? Then you got my message."

"I was told," he said, "that you wished to see me. I didn't believe it. But I mean to know what you could want with me."

"Not much," she said humbly, "but peace and forgiveness. There's no use in keepin' things up forever."

"What things?" he asked. "And who's keepin' 'em up?"

"On Dick," she cried passionately. "You know that I'm me. I want you and Ned to be friends, and to forgive and forget. Sure, 'tisn't right nor reasonable to be keepin' things up forever."

"Is that what you want me for?" he cried passionately. "Av it is, go back to your drinkin' an' dancin', and take this from me. That nether here nor hereafter, in life or in death, will I ever forgive the man who wronged me and mine."

"That's a hard word, Dick," the girl said and he knew now she was weeping in the darkness. "I'm sorry you'll be sore and sorry for some days. I was only actin' for the best. Whin I see all the neighbors gathered here an' injudicial themselves, and whin I looked across the fields from the hands of your house dark and lonesome, I sed to myself, That's not right! We must share with the neighbors whatever the good God has given us."

"And do you think, Martha Sullivan," said the thick husky voice, deliberately ignoring her married name, "that I and mine are thramps and beggars, like them gypsies down at the castle, that we should be beholden to you and Kerins for a male of vittles? Begor, ma'am, you have become high and mighty in your notions, since you come up from the sayside, where many a time I seen you with a kish of say-wed on your back, and glad to have paties and cookies for your dinner. Go back to your party and shop there; an' if you have any charity to bestow, give it to them as wants it. The Duggas, please God, have enough and to waste for the rest of their lives."

"I see there's no good in talkin' to you, Dick," the girl replied. "The black heart is in your heart—and all for nothin'!"

"For nothin'?" he echoed, in a sudden blaze of anger. "Is it nothin' that every mornin' I rise, I see it nothin' that should be mine and the cattle that should be mine in the hands of a black stranger? Is that nothin'? Is it nothin' when I stepped over the ditch and was harm'd nobody to be told to get out of that or that he'd blow me, body and soul, into hell? Is it nothin' that at every fair, market, and cross it is throu in my face that I've shown the white teeth and that I'm more afraid of Kerins's shooting-irons than of Almighty God? Is that it nothin'?"

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"Av I was as false as him, I'd say so," said Dick sullenly, "and then bid me times. But, because I'm a true man, I'll not lie to you nor God. I've an account to settle with the man you call your husband, an' whin it is settled, there'll be no arrarin'."

And his footsteps retreating across the dry grass and leaves; she heard him leaping over the ditch and the soft thud of his feet, as he descended into the ploughed field, but she stood still irresolute and frightened, with low laugh in the shrubbery woe ner up as a sense of her position, and, shaking off the stupor in which her interview with Dick Duggan had left her, she returned, silent and thoughtful, to the house.

If there was one subject more frequently debated than another during these revels at Crossfields, it was the sudden departure of Annie O'Farrell with young Wycherly for South Africa. To their unsophisticated minds—unsophisticated in the sense that they knew nothing of modern life, although they had a strong bias toward regarding things in an unfavorable light—it was nothing short of a grave scandal. "Elopement" means, dreever, things to an Irish congregation. It means certain denunciation both from the parish priest and from the bishop in his triennial visitation. It means the possibility of excommunication. The dread of the thing has come down from the times not very remote, when abduction was a capital offence in the eyes of the law and of the Church.

That there could be any mitigation, or reason for what they deemed the offence, never dawned upon them, for they could not believe that any young lady could sacrifice herself at the altar of duty, to nurse, or help, or comfort what they were pleased to call "a dyin' kinat'."

Hence it was warmly debated whether the parish priest, with Rommu or Sparta's determination, would sign the offence on the following Sunday in his wouted manner. Or would he depute his curate to do so, if it were too much for his own feelings? No one, who knew his character, dreamed for a moment that he would allow the offence to pass unrebuked.

"Let us see now," said Dick Duggan savagely, "what he'll do. He has spared near him on the dry needles of the trees. He stood motionless, and after a pause long and painful he heard his name whispered in the darkness. He waited for a repetition of it and then stepped forward and confronted the girl."

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He took his mother's advice literally. The tap-room was his theatre, his pulpit and bench, and to a plentiful crop of ne'er-do-wells and tipplers like himself, he could expound, without contradiction, his views on politics and religion and every subject that came within the bounds of human knowledge.

He found the place so pleasant, in constant with his home, that he spent the night there with boon companions, and between speculating and scandal-mongering and card playing, the time passed pleasantly by, so that when Dick went up about one o'clock next day, he had the slightest recollection of the events of the previous night. But his throat was very dry, and when he asked in a weak and tremulous voice for a drink of water, he was told to go to the kitchen and get it himself. He had to go to the kitchen, and there he found a "big fair" that day at the market-town of M—six or seven miles away, and in the afternoon the farmer from that part of the country were returning home and, of course, their horses would persist in stopping at "the Cross." It was a peculiarity in those animals, and it was universal. He heard the hall-door open without stopping at least until his owner could alight and ask the time of day.

Hence Dick Duggan, meeting so many "frinds," had to take a "thrash" and another and another, under penalty of giving deadly offence, until his hilarity and pugnaciousness came back to him and the depression and blue devil of the morning had vanished. Hence he became eloquent again on the pusillanimity and cowardice of his pastor; and, when he was rallied, because he was not invited to the "house-warming" at Kerins's, his face grew dark and sullen and he muttered something about a *Banshee* and a *Caoinn* again.

"You missed it, Dick," said a jovial farmer, who was reputed to be a grand hand at making a joke and a poor hand at receiving one, "you missed it. There never was such fun in the country before. All we wanted was to see you dancin' with the young maids."

Dick Duggan half-stiffed an oath and cried: "No more of that, Goggin!"

"I never saw a happier man than Ned Kerins," he said. "An' sure he ought to be. Thade Sullivan told me he walked the farm twice, and begor, if you were a needle, it would grow into a crowbar, so deep is the sill. And, sure, the whole country gives it up to Martha Sullivan for beauty. She'd turn on eggs and wouldn't break them."

"There may be another dance soon," said Dick, seeing all eyes turned upon him with a smile of pitying contempt as he spoke.

"Take care of the shooting-irons, Dick," said Goggin, going away. "He'd let your strength, as you soon as he'd say: 'Thrashticks!'"

Dick looked after him with bleared and bloodshot eyes. Then, continuing the line, he said: "There's a lot of talk about the parish priest's niece and Wycherly, and about his showing the white feather yesterday."

"There'll be more!" said Dick sullenly.

"'Tis a pity he'd be left of so aisy," said the man, winking at the crowd.

"Only I belong to another part of the parish," Dick said, without calling him to order himself.

"There's no wan here to do it," said a wag. "But Dick, I'm the only one that has a right to be here."

"Yes! But 'tisn't every wan would face the old lion in his den," said the other.

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