

Dork's Opportunity.

They had named her Dorcas out of respect to a great-aunt. The aunt had recognized the attention with a dozen teaspoons marked in letters of profuse adornment, 'D. M. to D. L. ;' to wit, Dorcas Mather to Dorcas Lunt.

The spoons were solid and heavy, but Dorcas Lunt wished a thousand times that the silver of which they were made had never been dug out of the earth—wished them and the dreadful name that came with them back where they started from. Dorcas was bad, and Dorky was a lower deep, and Dorky Lunt was, as Uncle Ned remarked one day, 'Simply atrocious—a temptation to a girl to commit suicide.' And, worse than all, she had overheard some one say that the name sounded just as the girl looked.

You see, Dorky was not in the least an interesting young person. She was ugly and awkward. She had been a querulous, absurd-looking baby, and as she grew older it was much the same, only that there was more of her, which made matters worse.

Dorky and Bertha used both to look in the glass a good deal. Bertha went away smiling to remember the pretty picture she had seen there, and Dorky stole off hating herself. I believe she studied her mirror with a sort of hope that some day she might find herself a little less ugly than she had been the day before; but she never did.

'It's just this way,' said Dorky; 'girls in stories always have one redeeming feature. Sometimes it is a plain face with the most astonishing hair down to their feet, like the advertisements of Sicilian Balm. Or it is a nose retroussé and an ugly mouth, but all the sweetness of everything steeped into a pair of "large, lustrous brown eyes," or, if it's nothing else, it is a certain "air." But I haven't even an air. Aunt Julia says I've "no personal magnetism," whatever that may mean.'

Uncle Ned said, 'I respect Dorky, but she isn't a girl for any one to be fond of.' And Dorky thought, 'If I could see one single human face look into mine the way people look at Bertha twenty times a day, I should keep that look and be happy over it till I died.'

Bertha, you'll understand, was pink and white, and looked as though she had been made out of sweet pea-blossoms or the inner lining of sea shells, and she had a pair of real blue-gentian eyes, with long lashes, that had the most distracting way of dropping down on her cheeks; and then she was a very nice, good-tempered little thing besides, and Dorky, who had good common sense, couldn't help seeing that one smile of her sister went further with people than her own most self-denying labors in their behalf.

Babies loved Dorky best, that is, while they were little. When they grew large enough to distinguish colors, they kissed Bertha in preference. They were not to be blamed. They would have chosen blush-roses instead of mignonette for the same cause. Ponto and Dick believed Dorky to be the most exquisite creature of the human race, but Ponto and Dick were only a dog and a horse.

'I wish I could do something for somebody to make them love me,' said Dorky to herself; and she tried in more ways than I can tell you to be gentle and helpful and kind, and she hoped 'it did do some good.' But, after all, she felt nearly always that she was a lonely, unloved girl, until one day this happened.

It was in the times when Madam Wainwright had a private school in her own house at the head of Elm street. The Wainwright mansion was set up on terraces, and was three stories high. Inside it was dark with low beams and mahogany panellings, and

frightful with carved monsters on the chimney-pieces. It was ghostly with corner closets, and perilous with steps up and steps down in the most unexpected places. It rejoiced in many deep alcoves, and in numberless corners of gloom. And it contained, as all grand old houses in Eastern Massachusetts should do, a chamber in which that worthy gentleman, George Washington, had once slept.

There was a grand old stairway of carved oak that led from the first floor to the second. In the third story were the music-rooms and the pianofortes, and the stairs by which you went up were a narrow flight between two ceiled walls. There was a small passage-way, or entry, at the top.

It was a Friday afternoon, and Professor Roofe had the singing-class, nearly the whole school, up in 'No. 6,' the largest room on the third floor. Herr Roofe was a little German gentleman, with a fierce moustache and a powerful voice. He was nervous all the time, and cross occasionally. To-day he was both, and he kept jumping up from the piano-stool and stamping around the room, and saying, 'Young ladiesh, dish ish awful!' And then he would turn red in the face and growl, after a fashion to strike terror into the innermost soul of everybody, except such as were used to it.

Outside the snow was falling, and the night coming on. Inside everything was getting dim, the air of the room was becoming close, the girls beginning to look flushed, but still shrieking away at the top of their lungs. In an inner room the little children were playing, and Dorky Lunt, who was a member of the music-class, heard Puss Pelton's shrill voice pipe up:

'Now we'll play somefin new. Play I was all growed up, 'n' had free chil'ren, 'n' they all had the whooping-cough together. Cough, all of you—this way.'

Dorky, from her place could look out through a small ante-room into the passage at the head of the stairs. There was a hanging-lamp suspended from the ceiling by three chains. Dorky, who was in a dreamy mood, sat watching this lamp, and as she watched she was aware of Caesar's shuffling step on the stair. He was an old negro who tended fires and lights for two or three families in the village.

'Miss Bertha Lunt will please to take this soprano solo,' said the professor.

'Excuse me,' answered Bertha's voice; 'but I'm afraid I can't sing it, sir.'

'I think you will try, and we shall see. You will rise up.'

Bertha rose up as she was told to do, stood with her music-book before her, and began to sing. She could barely see the notes, for the snow and the night were falling faster now, and all the corners of the room lay in shadow.

Dorky, sitting back with a restful sort of feeling, listened to her sister's voice, and then, suddenly, by one of those mental changes that come to us sometimes, everything about her seemed to be withdrawn—the girls and the music, and the children prattling in the next room, and Caesar clumsily balancing himself on the arm of the settee, and filling the pendant lamp from an old black bottle—all were floated off into a dreamy distance and dimness.

'Miss Dorcas Lunt, at-tention!'

Dorky was just turning her eyes toward the professor, but at that instant there came a tumult of noises from the passage—a fall, a crash of broken glass, and a roar of terror, easily to be distinguished as Caesar's. Then, quicker a great deal than I can tell it, Herr Roofe rushed toward the door, and screamed 'Fire!'

There were twenty girls in the room, and every one of the twenty sprang to her feet.

There were flushed faces and pallid faces, but all had one look in common—that of wild, panic-stricken terror—all save one face, that of Dorky Lunt.

I suppose she was the only girl of them who had a distinct idea what the matter was. She alone had seen the negro stumble and pitch down from his perch on the settee, had caught a glimpse of a huge black hand flinging itself out, clutching the lamp with a frantic grip.

'Fire!' shrieked the professor a second time, and then he sprang out into the ante-room. One or two girls jumped over the top of the benches in front of them. Some person stepped on Bertha's dress and dragged her to the floor, where several others stumbled over her.

It came across Dorky that instant, like a flash of inspiration, that here was something for her to do—that it was the one thing to be done, the only thing, and that she could do it. It was no question of good looks now, of ugliness or of grace—only of coolness and self-control; and Dorky, who had a thousand flutters on common occasions, was quite calm at this moment.

One thought smote through her mind—panic and flames together would kill them all. 'Remember,' she said to herself, 'the school in New York where children crowded the stairway, broke it down, and were crushed in the ruins,' and in an instant she had leaped to the top of the piano. She stood with one hand raised, and her voice had a clear ring, such as no one had ever heard in it before when she spoke.

'Girls, there's no danger if you'll be quiet! Sit down, every one of you!'

'And we sat down,' said Kate Clark, afterward. 'I'm sure I don't know what made us, for we had been like wild hyenas the instant before. But, somehow, I believe every mother's child of us felt that minute that she'd got to mind Dorky. She looked like a little fury, or a Cassandra, or anything of that sort, standing up there with her arm stretched out, and her face all white, and her eyes black-bright.'

'Well, I know for one,' added Madge Alden, 'that I sat down because I thought Dork'd kill me if I didn't; and the next I knew she had jumped off the piano, rushed out of the door, brought it to behind her, and turned the key.'

One idea possessed Dorky. She must put out that fire. There was no water on that floor, and even if there had been she knew that the blaze of kerosene oil was not to be put out by water. As she closed the door and turned the key in the lock, she bent and seized a heavy rug that lay at her feet. She fled away through the anteroom toward the entry, snatching a spread from the piano as she passed.

At the door of the passage she stopped an instant, saw a vision of fire, flames mounting to the ceiling, flames filling the narrow, walled-in stairway, smoke everywhere. She heard a wild tumult of roars and shrieks rising from below, where Caesar was stumbling about. The broken lamp had been a large one, the broken bottle had been nearly full of kerosene, and, to make matters worse, the floor of the passage and the stairs was oiled wood, and burned like tinder.

Dorky was stifled and half-blinded, but she lifted the great rug, flung it forward, and then sprang back to avoid the flames. The result was very good. The smoke became more dense, but the entry was darker. She had smothered the worst of the fire there.

'Now for the stairs,' she thought, and felt her way carefully to the head of the flight. Not daring to take up the rug, she folded the piano-cover, her next resort, and bent down, ready to fling its thicknesses over the upper