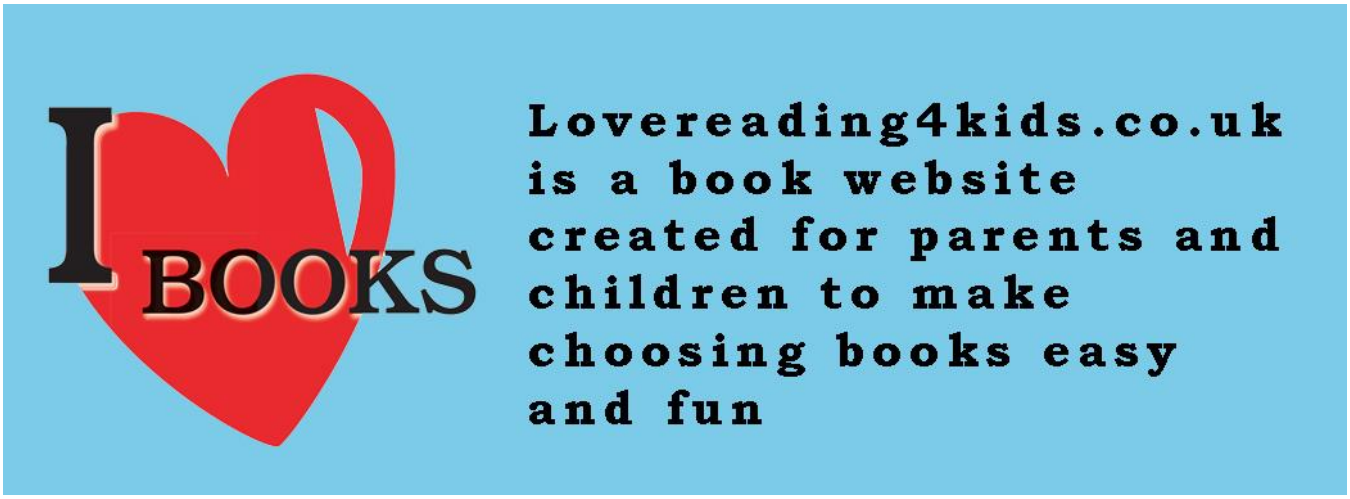


Opening extract from

A Dark Trade

Written by

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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First published in 2016 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-516-8

Printed in China by Leo

CHAPTER I

I couldn't help but gasp when Mrs Parkins and I reached Rose Villa, the house where I was to begin work as a kitchen maid. It stood tall and elegant in a pretty garden square filled with trees, shrubs and some late-blooming flowers. It was five floors high and at the first floor was a balcony with a row of bay trees. Behind the bay trees I could see large windows with ruffled and draped curtains, and two oil lamps which gave a soft glow to the room within.

"I am to live *here* ...?" I said to Mrs Parkins in amazement, as I stared up at the place in all its glory. The orphanage where I'd lived until then had been a squat building of dark brick, with small windows striped with iron bars and dull slates on its roof. The yard where we took our outside exercise contained nothing, no plant, tree, flower or growing thing.

Mrs Parkins was a matron at the orphanage and I was in her care that day. She tugged at my arm. "Come along!" she snapped. "Don't stand there gawking, girl!"

I let her pull me along, past the white marble steps up to the glossy black front door, and around to the back of the house. Here was a cobbled yard with two smart carriages, a handcart and three horses looking out of stable doors.

The back of the house wasn't as elegant as its perfect white front, but there was busyness and bustle. Dogs were running about and several women in blue aprons were going about their duties with piles of white sheets, silver trays and flowers. No one took any notice of us or even looked in my direction. 'Well,' I thought, 'I'm used to that.'

"Down you go," Mrs Parkins said, and she prodded me over to the basement stairs. "What are you waiting for?"

"So this is the girl, is it?" Mrs Green the housekeeper asked. She felt my upper arms, then looked at my teeth in the way I've seen carters examine the inside of a horse's mouth. She nodded and muttered. "Have you instructed her as to a kitchen servant's duties?"

"Oh, of course, Madam," Mrs Parkins assured her. "I trained her myself."

I looked round. I didn't know then, but this room was the housekeeper's parlour. I could see it didn't have such lavish furniture as the front rooms I'd seen from the road, but it was still a hundred times nicer than any room I had ever been in before. I couldn't help standing there and staring about me – at the heavy curtains with golden fringes, at the china ornaments crammed into the cabinet and the majestic portrait of our Queen, Victoria, above the fireplace.

Mrs Green nodded at me but spoke to Mrs Parkins. "And how long has she been at the orphanage?" she asked.

"Since she was born," was the reply.

"Really? Do you know the circumstances?"

"Some," Mrs Parkins said. "It seems a young woman was taken into an East London workhouse, very ill. A bit later they found this one ..." she jerked her thumb at me ... "in a bundle of rags on the steps outside. She was a –" She mouthed the next word, but of course I knew what it was.

Mrs Green just shrugged, as much as to say that this wasn't unusual.

"The young woman died before they could make her give her name," Mrs Parkins said. "We took her baby into our orphanage. Now she's sixteen she should have gone into the parish workhouse, but your master and mistress have been so kind as to offer a place for a homeless girl."

Mrs Green and Mrs Parkins looked at each other. I knew – and they both knew – that it was not a kind act at all. Girls like me were ten a penny, all willing to work for almost nothing in order to keep out of the workhouse.

"She started on domestic duties when she was seven years old," Mrs Parkins put in. "She's very willing."

"She needs to be." Mrs Green walked all round me, looking me up and down. "There are twelve servants in the house, and seven members of the family. A kitchen maid will have to fetch and carry for everyone."

"Of course," Mrs Parkins said.

"What's her name?"

"Her name is Georgina Friday."

"A strange name ..." Mrs Green said.

"Mr *George* Scribbs admitted her on a *Friday* night," Mrs Parkins explained. "He was one of the workhouse beadles. We call her Gina in the orphanage."

Mrs Green sniffed. "She'll be called by her surname here."

"As you wish." Mrs Parkins poked me in the back again. "Speak up, girl. Tell Mrs Green how grateful you are to be given the chance to work."

I cleared my throat ready to make the little speech Mrs Parkins had taught me, but Mrs Green wasn't interested. She turned to Mrs Parkins again. "You can be sure that if Friday

doesn't suit us – if she's not honest and hard-working – then we will reprimand her severely and return her to you."

I didn't know the meaning of this word – *reprimand* – but I didn't like the sound of it. I thought it must be something unpleasant. Still, I was happy to be away from the orphanage and I decided there and then that I would work hard and be honest and all the other things they wanted. That way, I could hope that I'd never set foot inside the miserable and mouldy walls of an orphanage or a workhouse ever again.

I thought I might feel tearful when I said goodbye to Mrs Parkins, or that she might have been a little sad, but she just patted me on the arm and said I must try and be a credit to the orphanage.

"Obey orders, work hard and respect the family," she said. "They have taken you into their home." Then she looked me in the eye and added, "Remember, your new life starts from today. Don't waste it."