

DARKNESS AND NATHANIEL by T.F. Powys

THERE once lived in a little cottage at Dodderdown a middle-aged gentleman named Nathaniel Crew.

Nathaniel had neither silver nor gold, he stooped when he walked, his beard and hair were long and untidy, his eyes sad and pensive, and his body lean and utterly unsuited to the hopes or his heart.

Nathaniel's wife had left him, his children were grown up and gone away, his neighbours looked upon him as an idle and a useless fellow, and no one in the whole world ministered to his needs.

Nathaniel could not dig, he was ashamed to beg, he was too proud to apply to the guardians of the poor for relief, and too indolent to accept employment from the rich farmer of his village.

But, even with the disadvantages that surrounded him, he wanted to live. Nathaniel did not wish to live only because he feared to die—he had a better reason for living than that. He loved light, he called light his friend, he loved colour. He was happy when the sky was blue, he was sad when the sky was covered all over with one vast thundercloud.

Nathaniel never felt alone when light was with him. Abroad in the daytime he would watch a rabbit or a child at play with the same gladness. Nathaniel's friend was always promising him pleasure in some kind of manner—by means of a sunbeam or a little candle.

"Oh! Nathaniel," Light seemed to say, "live and enjoy yourself, you are not dead yet, and one day you will be happy. Even if your beard is ragged, you cannot fail to find presently a young woman who will not be frightened by it."

So Light promised. But, with no better means to sustain himself than what he could find, Nathaniel was obliged to chew the watery turnips that he stole from the fields. And, in order to be able to purchase a little bread, he used to gather mushrooms in the dewy meadow before even the earliest labourer was stirring. During their proper season, too, he would find blackberries and watercress, and would sell all he could discover, as best he might. Also he visited the pine forest, and collected the dead wood in a little hand-cart, and these sticks he disposed of to the village women for twopence a bag.

Nathaniel, the friend of Light, was easy-going and romantic, and his life in the past had not been altogether unhappy. So long as there had been money to spend, his wife and children were well content to live with him, and had even rejoiced to see the master merry for a moment with any company from the village who chanced to mate up the party.

When Nathaniel was forty years old, a curious occurrence happened to him that influenced his fortunes — a gypsy told him, for a shilling, that he would die when he was fifty-five. Before that date he had been careful of his means, but when he heard this news from the gypsy, he began to spend his money. When he reached sixty his last penny was spent, and his family left him.

With his means at an end, other matters came to an end too. Pretty faces that used to look so happy did not now enter Nathaniel's doors; all domestic bliss, all toying and dalliance were over.

But yet Nathaniel, the friend of Light, lived undauntedly.

"There is nothing more wonderful than thou," he would say, speaking perhaps in the middle of a wide moor where no one was. "The golden sun is your king, his colour is yellow, and the smallest candle or rush-light partakes of his glory. The sun's power is so great that all living things are born of its radiance. In the light all men may rejoice. Even a blind man, though his body be darkened, can feel the sun enter and delight his soul."

After saying this, Nathaniel told a little stone-chat how fine a man he was, because he had such a grand friend whom he could talk to at any moment and who bid him ever hope. He observed, too, to the pretty bird, that he was glad the gypsy was mistaken about his death, for that now he intended to live until he was eighty.

One can easily imagine how Nathaniel used to shun and detest the opposite to his friend Light—namely, Darkness. In his merry moods of an evening he would set a light in his parlour to all the candles that he possessed, and not they alone would he light, but also the pulp taken from the rushes and soaked in oil and placed in clay vessels. When all were a-burning, Nathaniel would never grow weary of hoping that the old times of merrymaking would come again when he used to frolic and laugh with his wife and children. He couldn't forget those happy days when his family encouraged his light-heartedness, for under the generous impulse of that indulgent mood the master used to untie his purse-strings and let his money frolic too. The cottage lights would burn, the flames were leaping and dancing in the open grate, and the merry human faces were all aglow with the warmth of the room and the sly jest—many a winter's evening had been as joyful as a summer's day. . . .

Though his wife had gone and left Nathaniel at a pinch and in a sad necessity, yet she would sometimes relent a little and send him a shilling by the post, perhaps just to remind him that though the gypsy had been wrong about the date of his death, yet one day or other he would be sure to die.

Often Nathaniel, in the joy of friendship, would address himself to a sunbeam that he knew was all happiness.

"Hail! splendour of God," he would cry out, opening his arms and baring his breast, which was easy to do. "Hail! splendour of God. How pleasant it is to move in thy bright beams, would that thou couldst but talk with me to prove thy love, and surely, if we spoke to one another, our conversation would be universally admired."

Nathaniel never ceased to hope to attract to his room—for Light would be always promising him carnal pleasures, as well as more peaceful ones—a young creature of the same wanton kind as those that used in former days to romp and roll upon the parlour rug.

Light was always telling Nathaniel that joy should never be considered to be over until a man is quite dead, He showed him signs and wonders that bid him expect some pretty entertainment. Nathaniel saw that the darkest night ever turned into the day, and even after a grey week in winter the sun came forth all unexpectedly to colour the earth.

No one better liked to talk than Nathaniel, who would have talked all day long to his neighbours did they but permit him, but these good people always bethought them that a man so poor must needs wish to beg a crust, or at least a small candle-end or piece of soap, and so if any perceived Nathaniel move towards them they would move at much the same pace—only away.

But Nathaniel believed that others spoke to him, though his neighbours did not, and one morning, holding a raw mushroom in his hand that he was eating, and looking out of the window, he was sure that the sunshine said coyly to him, in reply to a handshake, "Dear Nathaniel, you must know by now that I am the Truth and that Darkness is a lie. My colour is yellow, and one day I will bring you a young woman with yellow hair, for I know your needs better than you do. I will bring her to you as well as a Venus cake. And be sure, at night-time, always to keep a candle in the window."

A long night, and especially a cloudy one, disagreed with Nathaniel Crew. Had he had the means, he would have burnt a candle through the dark hours, but he could not afford that, and so, after tossing to and fro in uneasy displeasure, he would often leave his bed, go to the window, and throwing it open he would address, in an angry voice, the darkness outside.

"Darkness," he would say, "be so good as to remember that Light is my friend. I will have nothing to do with you; you are no true colour, you are mottled; you are ugly despair, and I would not have you as my companion for one moment. You have always been my greatest enemy; cold doubt belongs to you and all greyness.

"A sameness is yours, and an unchangeableness, that I cannot endure. You are like a muddy field that is neither brown nor black. You do not believe in happiness, and so I do not believe in you. You are the great betrayer. Love you despise—that living flame of fire, kindled in two hearts at the same moment to be the delight of all, you give to the Devil. The child of Light, the Sun, shines gloriously upon the love that you despise. God's face burns red and He smiles too, and the holy angels sing together in praise of all desire. The grasshoppers sing to the same tune, and the little birds frolic. . . ."

Clothed in his rags, Nathaniel would step along the fields and byways, searching cheerfully for the kindly, though wild, fruits of the earth, and ever expecting — for Light lured him on to expect so—to see beside a lowly brook or wide-spreading tree a lively wanton, who would bid him become her partner in a joyful pastime.

But, alas! far other were the real happenings to what his hopes had looked for, for the girls that Nathaniel chanced to meet preferred to make others happy rather than him, and because he was so ill-clad and so lonely, instead of giving him gentle kisses, they would pelt him with mud and stones, using many an unpleasant word that Nathaniel blushed to hear spoken.

This naughty and rude conduct was painful to Nathaniel, who believed that no ugly or gross thing that crawls or creeps in the darkness should ever find house-room in so bright a being as a pretty young woman.

"Surely," he would say, after he was fled across a dusty or a miry field to escape his tormentors, "every maiden ought to belong to that holy first day of the week, the day of the sun, when all darkness is forgot and only happy love rules. . . ."

There happened to come a damp and gloomy day in the autumn when Nathaniel set out to hunt for mushrooms. He searched the downs for miles, sometimes hid in the mist and sometimes exposed, when the wind from the sea drove the mist away for a moment. He continued his search until the damp fog soaked him to the skin, and all that he found hardly covered the bottom of a small basket.

At length Nathaniel reached a wide lonely place where heaps of stones lay about, as if graves had once been there. Had Light betrayed him?

"Oh, Light!" cried Nathaniel, holding up his hands, while the rain—for the mist had become rain—trickled down his sleeves, "I have hoped with you for so long: can it be that you have now deserted me? I have believed in you, I have worshipped you, I have loved you, and I have ever felt hope rise in my heart like a sweet bird. Now I can hope no longer."

While Nathaniel spoke, he had not noticed that the rain ceased and that a beam of the sun pierced the gloom and covered him, while a voice said) "Hope on, Nathaniel, and do not forget to light a candle in your window-sill tonight, for someone may come."

Nathaniel hurried home, but, alas! when he reached his cottage, where all was completely dark, search as he might, he could find no candle nor even a rushlight. After the words of his friend, Nathaniel felt, more than he otherwise might have done, the want of a candle. He had seen no colour that day, and a candle, he knew, burns with a yellow light. Besides, his hope of a visitor had risen higher than ever that evening, for on his way home, when he passed the Rectory, where the butcher was delivering a leg of mutton, he had heard the maid who received the meat say that she was going out that night to visit a solitary man.

And Nathaniel, with hope in his heart, believed the naughty maid named him. Her name was Winnie; she was dark-eyed and very mischievous. Her friend was the butcher—he was the most bloody of all the men she knew—and now Nathaniel fancied she would come to him if he could only find a candle to set in his window to guide her to his cottage, but no candle could he find.

"Oh Light!" exclaimed Nathaniel, in deep sorrow, "I only ask you for a candle. I left one upon the table, but I believe the mice have eaten it. Will you be so kind as to give me another, for then Winnie will come, who is as gay as a sparrow. And God will clap His hands to see us so happy."

No answer came to Nathaniel. The damp wind moaned outside the cottage, and the rain, that now fell steadily, found a leakage in the roof and splashed through upon the stone floor.

Nathaniel sat upon a low stool; he stretched out his arms over the bare table and laid his forehead against the cold wood. Nathaniel shivered in the darkness. In this ill hour despair came to him, creeping like a snake along the muddy lanes, and, entering the cottage by a crack in the wall, coiled itself around the heart of Nathaniel as he leaned over the table. Nathaniel saw himself now as an old man, entirely forsaken and miserable, who had all his life cheated himself into believing that Light was his friend.

As soon as Nathaniel knew himself and knew what he was, a presence entered the room. Darkness was come.

Nathaniel travailed in spirit. He sadly lamented his case in moving words, his soul leaned upon death and his heart floated in a pool of the blackest melancholy.

Nathaniel rose up, meaning to fetch a piece of rope wherewith to hang himself, when a voice, that was bold, gentle and loving, addressed him thus— "Nathaniel," said the voice, that was most pleasant to hear, "Nathaniel, do not despair. You make me unhappy by allowing yourself to be so sad, only because you have no candle. It is not I, Darkness, but rather Light, who has done you all the harm. He is ever a busybody, a crier of hope when there is no hope, a liar and a meddler. What, by the Almighty Powers, has all your fine adoration of Light done for you? Your hopes fall about you like the broken rafters from a burning roof, young children cry out against you, your flowing tears moisten your beard, and all because you worship the wrong colour."

A peace, such as Nathaniel had never experienced in his life, now gladdened his mind, he looked lovingly into the mild eyes of Darkness.

"Darkness," he said, "tell me why I have always been afraid of you?"

"You have never understood how I love you," replied Darkness, "or else we should long ago have been friends, for as you know now, I am able to give you the loveliest thoughts that ever man had."

Nathaniel placed his hand upon the table, he felt a box of matches and a candle that he had placed there but forgotten. He went to the cottage door and threw the candle and the matches out into the rain.

"Speak yet again, Darkness," said Nathaniel, "for your remarks interest me."

"Dear Nathaniel," said Darkness, "the friend whom you have served so faithfully has been your ruin. Your God-like understanding, your simple and yet wise way of life, has been scoffed at by the Ignorant, and what are they—the fools—but only the feeble and cowardly reflections of proud, garish Light?"

Nathaniel held out his arms and Darkness embraced him.

"I have forgotten Winnie," said the poor man.

"You will be the happier," observed Darkness. "Under the huge arch of my blackness you will know Winnie for what she is. Let such things, who do but shine by the light of illusion, minister to you, if you will, but in my temple it is unlikely that you will wish to be troubled by them. A girl does pretty well for the day, but once in the darkness one learns to love what is profound, lasting and sublime. 'Let your light shine' should rather be, 'Let your darkness deepen.' "

"Light, when he was my friend, was always promising me pleasure," said Nathaniel, holding Darkness yet nearer to his bosom. "Every morning he would say to me, in his light and airy manner, 'Run out now, Nathaniel, on the moor or in the lanes you will meet a maid who will call to you to come to her.' Dear Darkness, have you anything to give?"

"I give eternal longings," replied Darkness, "and after that true happiness."

"And what is true happiness?" asked Nathaniel.

"Death," replied Darkness.