

that night, I had a bad cold, and could not sleep—but knowing that she was not well, I lay quite still, fearing to disturb her. She slept during the early part of the night—the clock had just struck twelve, when she started up in the bed, and called Dinah to come to her quickly. Her voice sounded hollow and tremulous.

“What ails you, Rachel, disturbing a body at this time of night?”

“Do not be angry with me, mother; I am dying.”
“If you think so, let me send for the doctor?”

“It is too late now—he can do me no good—I have something I must tell you before I go. Sit down, whilst I have strength left to do it; but promise me, mother, that you will not abuse the confidence I am about to repose in you.”

The old woman nodded assent.

“That will not do, mother—I must have your solemn word—your oath.”

“What good will that do? No oath can bind me—I believe in no God, and fear no evil.”

This was accompanied by a hideous laugh—the young woman groaned aloud.

“Oh, mother! there is a God—an avenging God—could you feel what I now feel, and see what I now see, you, like the devils, would believe and tremble. You will know it one day, and like me, find out that repentance can come too late. I will, however, tell the plain truth, and your diabolical policy will perhaps see the use which may be made of such an important secret.”

There was a long pause—some sentences passed between them in such a low voice I could not distinctly hear them; at last I heard Rachel say:

“You were away when the child died—you thought I followed Robert Moncton’s advice, accepted the bribe he offered, and killed him.”

“And did you not?”

“I took the bribe, but the child died a natural death, and I was saved the commission of the crime, you and he united in urging me to do. Now listen to me, mother.”

What she said was in tones so low, that, though I strained every nerve to listen, the beating of my own heart frustrated all my endeavours. Her communication appeared to astonish her auditor—her dark wrinkled brows contracted together, until not a particle of the eye was visible. She sat for a long time in deep thought, rocking herself to and fro on the bed, whilst the dying creature regarded her with expanded eyes, and hands raised and locked tightly together; at last she spoke:—

“Promise me, that you will make no ill use of my confidence. What shall we gain by being tools in the hands of a wicked man like Robert Moncton? Why should we sell our souls to do his dirty work?”

“Do not think it is to serve him, I would do ought to injure the child. No, no! Dinah North is

not such a fool—it would be to gratify my own revenge! I have this bad, bold Robert Moncton, in my power—this secret will be a fortune to me, and I will extort from his proud avaricious soul, a good portion of his ill-gotten wealth. Ha! ha! my child! you did well and wisely, and may die in peace, without the stain of blood upon your soul!”

Rachel shook her head despondingly.

“‘There is no peace,’ saith my God, for the wicked. My soul consented to the crime. Whilst the thought was in my heart, and my purpose firm to perpetrate, the bolt of the Almighty smote me, my resolution wavered—but I feel the guilt the same. Mother, it is a dreadful thing to die without hope—where is Alice?”

“Sleeping.”

“Let her sleep—I feel sleepy too; smooth my pillow, mother—give me a little water—I feel easy now—perhaps I shall awake in the morning better.”

The pillows were arranged—the draught given—but the sleeper never awoke again.

Her mysterious communications, which only came by halves to my ears, filled my mind with vague conjectures. I cannot help thinking to this hour, that Sir Alexander’s son came to an untimely death. The allusions to myself are still involved in doubt.

Stern as my mother had been, her death was felt severely by us all—the more keenly by Alice and me, as it removed from our humble home an object most dear to us both, the little lady of the manor, to whom we had ever given the endearing appellation of sister. After Margaret left us, how dull did all our pastimes appear. Alice and I wandered, silent and solitary, over all our beloved haunts. The songs of the birds ceased us no longer—the flowers seemed less fair—the murmur of the willow crowned brook less musical—the presiding genius of the place had vanished. We felt that we were alone.

I had now reached my fourteenth year, and Sir Alexander, true to the promise made to his wife, sent me to an excellent school in York. Here I made such good use of my time, that before three years had elapsed, I had gained a station in the head class, and won the esteem and favour of the master and ushers. My munificent patron was greatly pleased with the progress I had made, and promised to send me to college, if I continued to deserve his good opinion. Ah, Geoffrey, these were halcyon days, when I returned to spend my holidays at the lodge, and found myself ever a welcome visitor at the Hall. With a proud heart I recounted to Sir Alexander all my boyish triumphs at school, and the good baronet listened to my details with pleasure, and fought his own juvenile battles over again, to the infinite delight of our admiring auditors, Margaret and Alice, who spent most of her time with Miss Moncton at the Hall. Margaret was so attached to her foster sister, and wept so