

neighborhood, and place him in suspicious circumstances—do you understand me!—and then do the old man's business; the suspicion might fall upon him, instead of upon you."

"I would certainly rather transfer the hemp collar to his neck, if it could be done in safety. But how is it to be brought about?"

"The Devil will help us at a pinch," said Mathews. "I have scarcely turned it over in my mind. But do you think your heart would fail you Godfrey, if it should come to murder on your own account?"

"Do you take me for a coward?"

"Not exactly—I was making some allowance for natural affection, and all such unfashionable weaknesses."

"Pshaw!" muttered his companion. "Give me the chance—and talk of my actions afterwards. What affection do I owe them? Anthony robbed me of my father's love, and now stands between me and my uncle's fortune."

"Both impediments will be removed before long. I owe Anthony something on my own account, if it were only for the contempt with which he treated me. I suppose your chance with Miss Whitmore may be considered as no go?"

"Oh, hang her! don't name her. I would rather have poor Mary without a farthing, than be domineered over by that pretty prude, and her hideous old aunt. I believe I might have had the old maid for the asking—ha! ha! ha!"

"If you are wise, Godfrey, you will keep this affair to yourself. Don't let Mary know one word about it."

"She won't peach?"

"I'd not trust her,—women are strange devils. They will often do the most barbarous things, when their own interests or passions are concerned; and at other times will sacrifice their best friends from a foolish qualm of conscience, or out of mistaken benevolence. If you wish our schemes to be successful, don't let Mary into your secrets."

A wild laugh sounded in his ear. They started—and turned round, and beheld Mary standing quietly beside them—Mathews surveyed her with a stern, searching glance. She smiled contemptuously to herself—but she drew back as if she feared them.

"Did you overhear our conversation, Mary?"

"I can keep my own secrets," said the girl; "I don't want to be burdened with yours. They are not worth keeping—my sleep is bad enough already. A knowledge of your deeds would not make me sleep sounder."

"It would make you sleep so soundly, that evil dreams would not be likely to break your slumbers," said her brother, clenching his fist. "Betray but one syllable of what you have overheard, and your bed is prepared for you."

"I do not care how soon," said the girl. "If you hold out such a temptation, I don't know what I might be led to do. They say that the sins of the murdered are all visited upon the murderer. What a comfort it would be to transfer mine to you." This was said in a strain of bitter irony, and however unwilling to betray himself, it seemed to affect her brother.

"Who talks of murder?" he said. "You are dreaming. Go to your bed, Mary; it is late; and don't forget to say your prayers."

"Prayers!" reiterated the girl. "The prayers of the wicked never come up before the throne of God. My prayers sound in my ears like blasphemy. How must they sound in the ears of God?"

"Don't talk in this way, Mary. You make my flesh creep," said Mathews. "I have never said my prayers since I was a boy at my mother's knee; and that was before Mary was born. Had mother lived I should not have been what I am—and, poor Mary!" There was a touch of human tenderness in the ruffian's tone and manner. The remembrance of that mother seemed the only holy thing that had ever been impressed upon his mind; and even sunk as he was in guilt, and hardened in crime, had he followed its suggestions, it would have led him back to God; and made him the protector, instead of the base vendor of his sister's honor.

"What is the use of dwelling upon the past?" said Godfrey, pettishly. "We were all very good little boys. My father always told me so; and, by the strange contradictions which are every where to be found in human nature, I suppose that was the very thing which made me a bad man. And bad men we both are, in the world's acceptation, and we may as well make the most we can out of our acquired reputation."

"Now, I would like to know," said Mathews thoughtfully, "if you ever felt a qualm of conscience in your life?"

"I have no fears of a future state. Let that answer you."

"Do you never fear the dark?" said Mathews, glancing timidly around. "Never feel, that eyes, are looking upon you—cold, glassy eyes, that peer into your very soul. Eyes which are not of this world, and which no other eyes can see. Snuff these candles, Mary. The room looks as dismal as a vault."

Godfrey burst out into a loud laugh. "If I were troubled with such ocular demonstrations, I would wear spectacles. By Jove! Billy Mathews, waking or sleeping, I never was haunted by an evil spirit worse than yourself. But here's Skinner, at last. Fetch the brandy, Mary, to yon empty table—and now for a game at blind hooky."