

my guilty mind, I heaped curses upon my own miserable head, and wept till the fountain of tears was dry—till my heart withered and my brain burned, and I had not a tear to shed! Then came the fierce revilings of conscience—the fiery upbraidings of remorse; and memory, like a mocking fiend, slowly turned over the tear-stained pages of the past, and goaded me to despair, by recalling the feeble efforts I had made, in the hour of trial, to maintain my boasted virtue.

“The wrath of my brother, the contempt of Andrew Miller, and the scorn of the whole village, rose in gloomy perspective before me; and every brook and pool of water tempted me to bury my grief and shame beneath the impenetrable veil of oblivion. But I felt a new feeling stirring in my heart—a light shining through the darkness of the grave! It was love—a mother’s love! pleading for the safety of her unborn infant; and at length I gained sufficient courage to inform Ardyn of my unfortunate situation.

“He was thunderstruck at the information, and threw out dark hints of an effectual means of concealment, which filled me with dismay and horror. Never did those wild, restless eyes, assume an expression so dubious and unnatural as at that fearful moment; I shrank shuddering from their baneful gaze. It was no time to indulge in idle fears. Madness and despair were struggling in my breast, and my grief at last found a voice. I knelt upon the damp sod—I clasped his knees, and bathed his feet with my tears. I humbled my spirit to the dust, as I exclaimed in the bitterness of my soul:

“‘Ardyn Redgrave! the crime, the guilt is yours. I call upon you in the name of Almighty God! to redress this grievous injury. Become the lawful father of my child, or put an end to my miserable existence. Yes! here on this very spot that witnessed my shame, blot it out forever with my heart’s blood.’

“‘Wretched girl!’ he cried, striving to raise me roughly from the ground, ‘I cannot make you my wife.’

“‘You must—you shall!’ I cried, resisting his efforts to lift me from his feet. ‘You cajoled me with this promise to do the thing that was evil, and brought me into this fearful strait; and you alone can extricate me from it. Treat me as a slave—as a vile and degraded wretch, for such I am—but save me from dishonor—save me from my brother—and worse, far worse—save me from myself!—from the desperate crime of lifting my impious hand against my own life, of committing a double murder, and damning both my body and my soul!’

“He regarded me with a fixed and gloomy stare—a look so cold and so unfeeling—that my blood curdled in my veins. A smile wreathed his lips!—there was something dreadful in that smile! I gazed upon him till the mask fell slowly from my eyes, and I beheld in the man I had madly loved, a cruel and designing villain, and I loathed him as the author of my misery and of my wrongs. Yes! I could have raised my hands to heaven and solemnly cursed him, but his voice prevented me. He spoke—but in accents so slow and distinct, that every word he uttered vibrated upon my brain like the stroke of a hammer.

“‘You had better die, Jane, than become my wife.’

“‘Were it only *my* life,’ I cried, ‘I would terminate my existence at your feet. But the life of *another*—a *dearer* being, depends upon the words of your lips—the life of *your child*! Cruel and unnatural Ardyn!’

“I buried my face in the long grass, and almost screamed with agony.

“He appeared moved by my frantic distress, and lifting my now passive form from the earth, he whispered in my ear:

“‘Can you forsake friends, home and country, all that is dear to you, and follow me?’

“‘I can—I will!’ I exclaimed, a ray of hope darting into my soul. ‘You are my world—my life—my joy! the only hope I now can cling to—’

“‘Meet me then at the church, at eight o’clock to-morrow morning, and become the most miserable wretch on the face of the earth! And mark me, Jane, take neither purse nor scrip for your journey; my wife will have no need of these things.’

“He turned to leave me, but I held him with a convulsive grasp. The transition from grief to joy, to hope from despair—was so sudden and unexpected, that it affected my reason, and I vented my feelings alternately in laughter and in tears.

“‘Bless you!—God bless you, my husband!—my beloved!’ I exclaimed; ‘you have saved me from eternal misery!’

“I flung my arms about his neck—I pressed him to my bosom, and bathed his face and hands with my tears; but he seemed insensible to all my caresses; and disengaging himself from my wreathing arms, he repeated in a low, deep voice—

“‘To-morrow!’ and plunging into the wood he instantly disappeared, and I returned to the house in a fever of excitement, dreading, yet frantically anticipating the return of light.