

THE LIVING LINK.



CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE SECRET.

ON a pleasant evening in the month of May, 1840, a group of young ladies might have been seen on the portico of Plympton Terrace, a fashionable boarding-school near Derwentwater. They all moved about with those effusive demonstrations so characteristic of young girls; but on this occasion there was a general hush among them, which evidently arose from some unusual cause. As they walked up and down arm in arm, or with arms entwined, or with clasped hands, as young girls will, they talked in low earnest tones over some one engrossing subject, or occasionally gathered in little knots to debate some point, in which, while each offered a differing opinion, all were oppressed by one common sadness.

While they were thus engaged there arose in the distance the sound of a rapidly galloping horse. At once all the murmur of conversation died out, and the company stood in silence awaiting the new-comer. They did not have to wait long. Out from a place where the avenue wound amidst groves and thickets a young girl mounted

on a spirited bay came at full speed toward the portico. Arriving there, she stopped abruptly; then leaping lightly down, she flung the reins over the horse's neck, who forthwith galloped away to his stall.

The rider who thus dismounted was a young girl of about eighteen, and of very striking appearance. Her complexion was dark, her hair black, with its rich voluminous folds gathered in great glossy plaits behind. Her eyes were of a deep hazel color, radiant, and full of energetic life. In those eyes there was a certain earnestness of expression, however, deepening down into something that seemed like melancholy, which showed that even in her young life she had experienced sorrow. Her figure was slender and graceful, being well displayed by her close-fitting riding-habit, while a plumed hat completed her equipment, and served to heighten the effect of her beauty.

At her approach a sudden silence had fallen over the company, and they all stood motionless, looking at her as she dismounted.

"Why, what makes you all look at me so strangely?" she asked, in a tone of surprise, throwing a hasty glance over them. "Has any thing happened?"

To this question no answer was given, but each seemed waiting for the other to speak. At length a little thing of about twelve came up, and encircling the new-comer's waist with her arm, looked up with a sorrowful expression, and whispered,

"Edith dearest, Miss Plympton wants to see you."

The silence and ominous looks of the others, and the whispered words of the little girl, together with her mournful face, increased the surprise and anxiety of Edith. She looked with a strange air of apprehension over the company.

"What is it?" she asked, hurriedly. "Something has happened. Do any of you know? What is it?"

She spoke breathlessly, and her eyes once more wandered with anxious inquiry over all of them. But no one spoke, for, whatever it was, they felt the news to be serious—something, in fact, which could not well be communicated by themselves. Once more Edith repeated her question, and finding that