

confidentially exclaimed, as he wiped off almost reverentially, a tear that yet glittered on his tiny hand.

"Poor, poor, Lady Eva! I wish to goodness, Mr. Arlingford were here!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THAT night, while revolving in silence and solitude the events of the day, more than one remorseful pang troubled the happiness Eva derived from the recollection of the perfect wedded bliss enjoyed by her brother and his partner.

"Yes, yes, she murmured, her pale cheek gaining for the moment a crimson glow; it was wrong, very wrong! I, the promised, affianced wife of another, I should not have asked so eagerly about him, nor listened with so wildly beating a heart to the praises of which he was the object. Even the passionate caresses I lavished on that child because he bore his name, because he had been an object of his love and care, were an injustice to poor George, an injustice too which must be atoned for. Arlingford must be no more my topic, Carry must no more repeat in my presence the praises which may work such fearful havoc in my earthly peace; and that child, that beautiful child, whose dark eyes seem to have caught the depth of earnest feeling, the softened light that beam in his, even he I must avoid. If I am to wed poor George, the heart I bring him though devoid alas! of even one spark of love for himself, must at least be free from all cause of remorse or self reproach. Three days hence he will be here, returning from the home he sought so joyfully to prepare for the arrival of his cheerless bride. And how cold will be the greeting, how poor the welcome he will, at best, receive. Oh! would to heaven we were still in Italy—France, anywhere save in England. Its haunting reminiscences, its calling up of days gone by, its renewal of former ties have been too much for this weak heart."

As Eva had predicted, Sir George soon arrived at Huntingdon Hall, and from that period, her time was so entirely engrossed by different cares that she found it almost impossible to steal a visit to her friends. Not indeed that her time was in any way monopolized by the bride-groom elect, for the latter soon wearied of pouring his plans and observations into so apathetic an ear, and turned to Lady Huntingdon who displayed more interest in his account of the triumphal arches, joybells and illuminations that were to welcome Lady Leland to her new home. She

even listened with complacency when he touched upon the beauty of the equipages, the perfectly ordered retinue and the splendour of the establishment that were to be at the bride's command. But, if Eva thus escaped the infliction of details that seemed to her a mere mockery, there were other duties almost equally irksome that could not be avoided, and the time sped, notwithstanding her weariness of heart, with singular rapidity. But one short week now remained and it seemed to her that there was yet more undone than could be accomplished in as many months. She was sitting alone in her private sitting room one morning having just returned from a stolen visit to Elmswater. The agitation of her features and the traces of tears that yet lurked in her heavy languid eyes betokened the interview had afforded her more pain than pleasure, and so indeed had it been. For the first time, she had found courage to communicate to them the tidings of her long engagement and approaching marriage with a man, whom they seemed intuitively to know, she neither loved nor revered and the intelligence was to them as a clap of thunder. Recovered from their first overwhelming surprise, every argument that affection could invent, every remonstrance that tender anxiety could bring forward, were employed to dissuade her from so ill suited a union. But Mrs. Huntingdon's prayers and tears, her husband's passionate and almost angry adjurations were alike vain, and Eva parted from them sadly but firmly assuring them;

"That when next they met, she would be George Leland's wife."

Firm as she had appeared during that trying interview, it had nevertheless affected her terribly, entirely dispelling the fictitious tranquility she had with such difficulty acquired, and giving form and voice to the many dark fears and doubts that had before lurked unanalyzed and unheard in the depths of her own heart. Yet, if she were to be the bride of Sir George, their remonstrances and persuasions had been, at the best, ill-judged and unwise, and as she sat there, revolving all that had passed during the visit, the many new fears infused into her breast and the confirmation added to the old, she could not help bitterly regretting that she had ever sought it.

"Yes," she murmured with a long drawn sigh, "They both predicted what my own heart has so often darkly fore-shadowed, they both told me Lady Leland would be even more wretched than Eva Huntingdon has been. But I must have done with these useless haunting thoughts and turn to a duty from which my irresolute heart has shrunk too long."