

she carelessly looked up and expressed her satisfaction that he had arrived safely.

"How did the ball come off?" he asked.

"Brilliantly, though you did not honour it with your presence."

"I could not do otherwise. But are you alone?"

"Quite. I am not dressed to receive callers, and Miss Maberly left for home this afternoon."

Some weeks ago this piece of intelligence would have rejoiced her listener's heart, but it seemed to matter very little to him now.

"She left somewhat suddenly, did she not?"

"Yes, owing to a letter from home enjoining her return."

"I fear, Virginia, you will be quite lonely without her."

"Oh, one gets accustomed to everything, Mr. Weston, even to a husband's absence both night and day!"

The young man looked at her with an expression of sorrowful perplexity. Was this a serious reproach, or was it only one of the pettish sallies so common to her when out of humour?

"Why, Virginia, Miss Maberly, and indeed yourself, generally contrived to make me feel in the way when I happened to be much with you."

"Then if Miss Maberly was the cause of your self-inflicted banishment, she is gone now, and I am quite alone. Will you accompany me to Mrs. Markland's to-night?"

A troubled expression flashed across Weston's face, and in a low husky voice he answered:

"Impossible! Business of a serious nature will keep me at the office to-night."

"Just as I had expected. Believe me, Clive, any other answer would have surprised me."

"Listen, Virginia. I am expecting a letter the importance of which no word could exaggerate. Shall I confide in you—tell you all?"

Had not the young wife been so much absorbed in her own grievances, so thoroughly out of humour, she could not but have perceived the speaker's agitation; but it escaped her, and she coldly rejoined:

"Please spare me ledger and counting-house details. The simple answer that you cannot come is sufficient. But dinner, I see, is served!"

The meal was so dull—conversation so difficult—that Virginia caught herself recalling more than once with regret the light small talk with which Letty enlivened their meals. Clive, however, did not linger long. A servant entered to say that Mr. Weston was wanted down at the office as soon as he could make it convenient.

The young man turned very pale, and hurriedly saying "Good bye, Virginia," left the room. That night Mrs. Weston was unusually careful over her attire, and the result proved satisfactory even to herself.

The carriage came round, and after taking a last glance in the mirror at the radiant image it reflected, she turned to go. As she did so a strange feeling came over her, a sort of vague, shuddering dislike to leaving home. She leaned against her dressing table. What could it mean?

"What is it, ma'am? Do you feel ill?" asked Cranston. "Perhaps you're nervous."

"Well, as we do not know what to call it, we'll suppose it is that," and the young beauty stood for a time twisting her glittering bracelet with an absent look. Suddenly she raised her head, and smiling at her own fancies and her maid's solemn face, ran lightly down the stairs.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. Markland's ball fully equalled in brilliancy the one at Weston Villa. The same people, the same dazzling toilets, elaborately spread supper-table, and the same crashing quadrille band.