

A FOOTLIGHT FAVORITE.

CHAPTER VI.

It was Mark who lifted Leslie into the mail-phæton which was waiting to take them to the station; but it was Sir Hugh who rather jealously interposed to wrap the dust rug over her demy gray draperies, touching her hand softly as he took his seat beside her and gathered up the reins. Mark was to sit behind, Sir Hugh's groom having already gone on to meet them at the station.

"A pleasant journey, my dear!" Lady Forsyth said kindly, smiling at the beautiful face near her son's. "Give my kind regards to your sisters, and say I hope soon to have the pleasure of making their acquaintance."

"Thank you," was Leslie's quiet response, but she added no other word; perhaps she thought that the girls would not appreciate the honor as they should do, or perhaps it was some other thought which made her answer so shortly that it only escaped being ungracious by the gentleness of her utterance.

"Stay one minute, Hugh," her ladyship said quickly. "McNeil is coming with some flowers for Leslie."

As they waited, Mark, who had been taking leave of Lady Forsyth and Bee, hurried to take his seat, and, as he did so, he caught sight of Leslie's face. She was leaning forward in the phaeton, and her eyes were fixed upon the grand old house rising so fair and stately in the summer sunshine; and as she looked a passing expression of pride and satisfaction swept over her features. Oakhampton was indeed a home of which many a woman would have been proud to be mistress; there were few more stately in the length and breadth of the land.

As the lady of Oakhampton, Leslie need have no more toilsome days, no hard study, no jealousy from less successful actresses, nor would she be obliged, as she sometimes was, to bear a touch unpleasant to her, to feel lips near her own from which she shrank with passionate repugnance. Sir Hugh Forsyth's wife need have no fears for the future, when illness or age should have prevented work; her sisters need know no privations, they could have every advantage—Jenny could have the music-lessons she so longed for. Macie need not go out to her dismal teaching morning after morning, when Leslie was rich.

All these things flashed through the girl's mind as she leaned forward, looking at the noble mansion which was to be her future home; then her glance rested on a slender figure in blue which stood on the broad white steps, with the sunshine on her golden hair and a pitiful little smile on her lips, a smile which she tried to make cheerful and bright, poor child; but the attempt was a failure, for it was belied by the sadness in the sweet eyes, as blue as the dainty cambric gown.

When the old head-gardener, a dignified individual, whose favor Leslie had won by her great love for and appreciation of his beautiful flowers, came up with a basket full of magnificent roses, Leslie started violently; but she recovered herself almost immediately, and thanked him pleasantly in her sweet unsteady voice, which had such a pretty plaintive intonation just then.

"Wait one moment, Hugh," she said, as Sir Hugh prepared to start; and, with hurried, trembling fingers, she took from the basket a most lovely glorie de Dijon rose; and, bending forward, she handed it to Bee, who came down the steps, coloring brightly, and stood on tip-toe to reach it. "You will remember that I gave it to you in all love," Leslie said gently, with a strangely radiant smile. "Now, Hugh," she added quickly, "I am ready, and we must not linger. It will not do for us to miss the train, will it?"

"Why not,?" Sir Hugh asked, as they

drove away. "There is another train somewhat later."

"Yes; but Dora will meet the one I arranged to travel by, and I am longing to see her."

The ride to the station was not a silent one, thanks chiefly to Sir Hugh, who was talking eagerly about alterations and improvements he was going to make on the estate, subject of course to Leslie's approval.

"Perhaps I had better leave them until we return," he said, "and we can consider the plans together?"

Leslie made no answer; but a slight smile flitted over her lips, a faint incredulous smile, which might mean anything or nothing.

"Everything seems perfect as it is," Mark put in from behind. "Any alteration will not improve your place, Forsyth."

"Oh, there is a good deal to be done! I was away such a long time, you know," Sir Hugh answered. "I must build some new stables too."

"What kept you so long away from home, Hugh?" Leslie questioned presently. "Lady Forsyth would have been terribly lonely, but for Miss Ferris."

"Miss Ferris has not been long at Oakhampton," Sir Hugh replied, with some constraint in his voice. "My mother has received but too little consideration at my hands, I fear," he added, with a little sigh. "We must try and make it up to her in the future, Leslie."

"Yes," she said gently. "I hope you will, Hugh."

But Mark noticed that she did not say "we," as he had done, and that there was a slight emphasis on the "you" which her fiancé apparently did not heed.

"You will not keep me waiting longer than you can help, Leslie?" Sir Hugh said, as they sauntered up and down the platform together, Mark having gone to take the tickets and see about the luggage, a task which he was discreetly prolonging to the uttermost.

There were some few minutes to spare, for Sir Hugh's swift chequers had covered the distance in a very short time, and the up-train was not yet due.

"You will not keep me waiting long, Leslie?" he repeated, as the girl made no answer. "I should like to take you abroad this winter, and show you all the places you are so anxious to see, and have you all to myself for a little while."

Leslie glanced up at him for a moment, with her bright melancholy smile.

"Would you?" she asked gently.

"I feel so much more at rest when with you," he continued rather huskily, looking down at the sweet face with some sorrow and remorse and tenderness in his own. "When I am away from you, Leslie, all sorts of doubts and fears come to me, and make me restless and dissatisfied. I am not worthy of you, dear, I know; but you will make the best of me, will you not?"

She had been walking by his side up and down the platform; but she had not taken his arm. Now she slipped her little hand within it.

"You must not speak so!" she said, her voice low and unsteady now. "You are worthy of any love you have won, Hugh. And, dear, in the future, whatever comes, you will remember that I have always acted for your happiness, and that it is the dearest thing in the world to me."

He pressed the little fingers gently, and looked down at her, smiling. Something in the beautiful face made the smile fade, and an anxious expression came into his own.

"What do you mean, Leslie?" he asked hastily.

"What do I mean?" she echoed smilingly.

ly. "Why, just what I say, of course! In the future, Hugh, if I seem to disappoint you, or hurt you, or vex you, you must try to forgive me and to excuse me to yourself by saying, 'She did it for the best; it is for my happiness.'"

Her face and voice were both very earnest just now; but she was smiling as she looked up at him, although she was very pale, even to her lips. Before he could answer, she had removed her hand from his arm, and had gone eagerly forward to meet Mark, who was coming towards them.

"Is the train signalled?" she said, with a strange eagerness, almost wildness in her manner. "Yes? Oh! I thought so! Did you telegraph to Dora, Mark? I should not like her not to meet us."

"I have obeyed all your behests," he answered laughingly. "By-the-way, do you know who is going up by the same train?"

"Some one we know?" she asked, the eagerness fading from her face and manner.

"Some one you know very well," he replied, "and some one who is very anxious to see you."

"Who can it be?" she said languidly.

"Jack Robson," Mark answered, smiling. "He has been staying in the neighborhood for some weeks, writing a new play which is to be brought out this winter, and the principal role has been specially written for you."

"Then Mr. Robson must prepare for a disappointment," Sir Hugh broke in, with some haughty impatience in his manner. "I hope Leslie will not take any new role. She must be content to rest upon her present laurels," he added, turning to her and speaking more gently. "They must be sufficient to her."

Leslie said nothing; she did not even glance at him as he spoke, and, with ill-concealed impatience, he saw her move forward so speak to Mr. Robson, a handsome, fair-haired *littérateur*, and by far the most successful playwright of the day. Sir Hugh had met him in London; but he greeted him with the greatest coldness consistent at all with civility, and looked very haughty and unapproachable.

The train came into the station, slackening its speed; the porters hurried up with luggage; Mark went away for a moment to see that all Leslie's belongings were safe; Mr. Robson hastened to secure a compartment, which he hoped to share with Leslie and Mark; and, for a brief minute, Sir Hugh and Leslie were alone.

"Leslie, you will not forget that you can enter into no engagements for this winter," Sir Hugh said hastily. "You must have some consideration for me."

"Do not fear," she said gently; "I will have so much consideration for you, Hugh, that I will put your happiness before all things. I will write to you to-morrow," she added, as she went forward rather unsteadily to the carriage.

"I shall expect the letter then, Leslie. What is the matter? You are ill," he added hastily, as she staggered; but she recovered herself immediately.

"No," she said, in a strangely quiet tone. "Good-bye, Hugh. Good-bye, my dear," she added softly, letting her eyes rest upon his face with a long, lingering, farewell look, which filled him with a strange foreboding and haunted him long after Leslie's pale face, framed in the window of the railway-carriage, had disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

The twilight was gathering over the great city on the second day after Leslie and Mark's return from Oakhampton Court, and the painter was alone in his studio. It was too dark to paint; but a picture wet upon the easel, and palette and brushes thrown carelessly beside it showed that Mark had been occupied, although now, leaning back in a great leathern arm-chair, he was smoking idly, his hands clasped behind his head, his

gray eyes full of thought—painful thought too, judging from the lines in his broad brow.

He was thinking of Leslie—when was he not thinking of her?—of the dumb anguish in her eyes during their journey back to town, of the intense love which had shone in them when they rested on Sir Hugh, of her strange mechanical acceptance of his own care during their journey; she seemed like a woman moving in her sleep, he had thought more than once. How would it all end? he wondered. Would Sir Hugh keep the promise in deed which he had already broken in spirit? Would Leslie, who had discovered the truth, accept a half-hearted allegiance, a faith which kept him indeed "falsely true?" He had not seen Leslie during the two days which had elapsed since their return, although he had called at the Sisterhood. She had gone to rehearsal, Dora Scott told him, looking at him with anxious enquiry in her eyes. She seemed well? he had asked, and her sister had answered, yes, well and very busy, and there had been a letter from Sir Hugh both mornings.

With that assurance he had to be satisfied, and with it he tried to quiet his anxiety for her; but it was difficult to do so, remembering the pain which had crept into Leslie's brown eyes during her first hour at Oakhampton, and which had seemed so deepened during her visit. True she had smiled and sung and feigned to be gay, but that look had never left her eyes, never for one brief moment.

Mark's own pain had been lost sight of in his sorrow for Leslie. Why had not Sir Hugh left her alone, he wondered fiercely sometimes, since his love had brought her misery? Why had he taken her—Mark's one ewe lamb—to be the pastime of some idle hours? Were there not thousands of women in the world, women in his own rank, who would have been glad to while away a few of their idle hours with him, that he must needs take Leslie—poor Leslie, who was so earnest and faithful and deep-natured? How could she be happy as his wife, knowing—as she could not fail to know, since he, Mark, had seen it—that Sir Hugh's love was hers no longer? That she loved him with all the passion and fervour of her nature, that she had poured out at his feet the inestimable treasure of such a heart as hers, Mark did not doubt; and he wondered how it all would end. Would she marry Sir Hugh, and seek in wealth and position for the happiness so many women find in them? He knew Leslie too well to let that thought take root. It was not for wealth or position she had betrothed herself to Sir Hugh; it was for the one omnipotent reason that she loved him; and, leaning back in his arm-chair, meerschaum between his teeth, Mark felt that it would be easy to die if he could give his darling the love she craved.

A knock at the studio door aroused him from his reverie, and, with a sigh and a little frown, he put down his paper and uttered a somewhat impatient—

"Come in!"

"A gentleman to see you, sir," said the servant; "his business is important, he said."

"Any name?" Mark asked laconically, with a longing glance at his meerschaum. "No, sir; but he begs you will see him. He is in the dining-room, sir."

"Very well, I'll come at once," the painter said rather moodily; and he preceded the servant down the long passage to the dining-room, a large, square, gloomy apartment looking out on to the dingy square, which was quiet and deserted now.

The blinds had not been drawn down; but the gas had been hastily lighted in the drawing-room—Mark's household was a rather irregular one, as a bachelor's household is apt to be—and the light fell strongly upon the pale agitated face of a young man who stood near the table, looking dusty and travel-stained and al-