

FAITHFUL AND TRUE.

BY R. LEWIS SMITH.

It was the first anniversary of my husband's death, and at Stella's request, I donned a robe of soft violet silk, while Stella fastened a cluster of roses in the hair of my throat, and among the beams of my black hair she fastened a wreath of myrtle.

"You look like a queen, my beautiful mamma," the girl said, when her task was completed, and she stood back to survey the effect.

Stella was my step-daughter, my pet and darling—a true indeed, the only star that had brightened the otherwise dreary path of my lonely life.

"I had been a true faithful wife to my departed husband, but he had known, when I consented to be buried under the ocean waves with my sailor lover."

It was an unhappy marriage, for my first husband was passionately fond of me, and I respected and honored him above all men on earth, and worshipped his sweet young daughter, my beautiful Stella.

"She was very lively, this child of my heart, with her blue cloud eyes, her fair girlish face, and shining array of hiving golden hair."

"Our home was a rambling old mansion, about a hundred miles distant from town, where Stella had just returned, from a month's visit to a schoolmate—the daughter of a merchant prince of the gay metropolis."

Stella had brought a party of friends home with her, and had taken upon herself to superintend the arrangements of my toilet for her special benefit.

While she was engaged in her loving task I studied her face intently.

There was something new and strange in its expression that puzzled me.

It was as if the child had returned to me a woman.

The beautiful young face seemed to have gained something that it lacked before.

A new soul seemed to look out at me from the violet depths of my darling's eyes.

A sudden suspicion came to me, and drawing Stella down to a low seat by my side, I passed one arm round her shoulders and clasping one of her slim, white hands, upon the forehead of which I caught the glitter of a diamond ring, she had never worn before—

"Stella, are you keeping a secret from me?"

"I needed no word from Stella's lips to tell me that my suspicion was not a soul foundation."

Her face crimsoned, her blue eyes shone like stars, and her sweet lips parted in a smile of almost unearthly sweetness.

"Mamma, darling, I meant to tell you something before we left our guests. I am glad you have shown me how to begin."

"Then, with a face hidden on my neck, she told me of her love for the handsome boy of her schoolmate, Elsie Rhodes."

"Mamma, you will love him yourself, I know," said my child, "he is so noble, so good, and so very handsome; and—listen, mamma—be the soul of honor."

"He has written me all about his past life, and it is like a romance. He once loved a beautiful young girl, and asked her to be his wife. You see I am not jealous mamma, because I know the now loves me with all his heart, and the past cannot be recalled."

"Well, he was poor then, and the young lady's guardian would not consent to their marriage. The poor fellow pined for the young lady in agony, and went away to sea. Shortly afterwards he inherited a fortune, and became captain of an ocean steamer, but on the first voyage the vessel was wrecked, and all the passengers and crew reported lost."

"It chanced, however, that the captain and several of the passengers were rescued by an Indian merchantman, and just two months ago, he (the captain) returned to his home. He might have returned a year ago, but the news had reached him that his promised wife was wedded to another, and for a time could not endure the thought of revisiting the old scenes of his youth, since embittered by the memory of his disappointment."

"Now, mamma, you know all; only how dearly I love him, that you can never know." Why, dear mamma, I cannot imagine how I managed to find any pleasure in life before I met him and heard him tell me that I was dear to him. I want you to love him for my sake, mamma, and I have tried to make you look even more beautiful to-night, so that he may love you, even as dearly as my Stella loves you."

The child had never lifted her face to my gaze while speaking, and now she continued, while her arms clasped themselves close around my neck—

"He will be astonished, mamma, when you appear like a vision of beauty before him, because he has no idea that his stepmother—how I hate that prefix—only five years my senior. He pictures you as a stately matron of forty, I know. But come dear mamma I shall not rest until I have presented you to Captain Elmer Rhodes."

At the sound of the name, so tenderly uttered by my step-daughter, my brain reeled and a deathlike faintness crept over me.

When I recovered my senses, Stella was bathing my temples while the knelt beside me in an agony of grief and anxiety.

I soon quieted her fears, declaring that the heat and the heavy perfume of the flowers had overcome me, begging her to go out my guests in the room below, where I promised to join her in less than half-an-hour.

She left me reluctantly, and I locked myself in my chamber, there to give way to the tumult of grief that raged in my heart.

"Marion, my darling, I die happy, knowing that you will always love my child, and guard her—from sorrow—it is need—with your own life—my Heaven bless you—and reward—my beloved wife."

With that last tender blessing on my name; his spirit had winged its flight, and now the memory of that death-bed scene stilled the storm of grief in my rebellious heart.

"Yes, my husband, I will be true to the trust you reposed in me, though she has taken from me that which was dearer than my life," I said to myself, as I descended the stairs to the brilliantly lighted rooms.

Even before I had entered the room, Elsie's voice, crying out in astonishment, was not yet strong enough to meet him face to face, I made my way to the conservatory, at the back of the house.

How long I had been there I can never tell, but I was aroused at last by Elsie's voice, crying out in astonishment, as she saw me standing in the doorway.

"Marion! My God! Am I dreaming?"

Before I could speak he had caught both my hands in his own, but I quickly released them.

"Hush!" I whispered, while my breath came quick and fast: "you must not call me by that name. I am Mrs. St. John: you are my step-daughter's promised husband. As you value your daughter's future happiness, never tell her the secret of our past."

Stella joined us at this moment, and I mingled with our guests, assuming a gaiety that found no echo in my suffering heart. For the next week I avoided him; but one day he met me alone on the banks of the river, and, forgetting Stella, poured into my ears the story of his love for me, begging me to save the child from the misery of a marriage with a man who could never give her his heart.

"I freed myself from the close clasp of his arms, although I loved him with every pulse of my passionate heart, my husband's parting words again recurred to me, and I sent him from me—my sailor lover, my darling. Ah, well!"

What need to linger over the weeks that followed!

"They were married, Stella and Elsie, and the tears I shed when we spoke the words that made them man and wife, were attributed to grief at the thought of parting with Stella, who was to go with her husband to Germany."

Stella I ever forgot how she clung to me when the moment came for that parting!

Her last words still ring in my ears, though many years have passed since that terrible day.

"Oh mamma, my darling! my darling! whatever happens in the future, remember that you have always made your little girl happy, and if God calls me first to meet papa in heaven, he shall know that you were faithful and true to the trust he reposed in you."

Then they took her from me, my golden-haired darling, the star of my desolate life; and for many days I lay in a darkened room, raving in delirium, and stretching out my empty arms to clasp the fairy form that was gone out of my life for ever.

My hand trembles, my eyes grow dim; I cannot speak of any length of the days that followed my recovery.

Two years passed away, and then came a day never to be forgotten.

A cruel message came to me from over the sea.

Stella Rhodes was dead.

She had died with her husband's arms around her, whispering at the last—

"Take my baby—to mamma—call it Stella—who will love it—for my sake."

For her sake! Oh, my beloved child! My angel Stella!

My tears are falling fast on the golden curls of the baby-girl playing at my knee, and my husband takes the pain from my hand, and clasps the child in a close embrace, "no lo whippers—"

Do not weep for our angel Stella, my precious Marion. She is happy in heaven to-night, knowing all—your sacrifice, all your love for her, and your noble conduct to her child. My dear Stella, do not your name! Let her be good girl, dear mamma," echoes the child at my knee.

And with head bowed over my baby's bright head, I pray heaven to make me worthy of the happiness that comes to me at last.

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