

A FOOTLIGHT FAVORITE.

CHAPTER I.

"I will not dream of her tall and stateli,
She whom I love may be fairly light;
I will not say she should walk sedately,
Whatever she does, it will surely be right."

"But I must be courteous should she be bold,
Pure in her spirit, the maiden I love;
Whether her birth be noble or lowly
I care no more than the spirit above."

"But I'll give my heart to the lady's keeping
And ever her strength on mine shall lean
And the stars shall fail and the angels be
weeping.
Ere I cease to love her, my queen, my queen!"

The rich barytone voice rose clearly, filling the great untidy studio with melody; then, as it died away, Mark Stretton drew back from his easel and contemplated the picture thereon with dreamy, meditative dark eyes, in which lingered a world of tenderness and love.

The room in which he stood was a large and lofty one, with a good north light, let in by a skylight-window overhead; and it was built out from the back of an old-fashioned house in the neighbourhood of Russel Square—a house with low wide rooms and rambling passages, badly-shutting doors, and windows with quaint little panes of thick greenish glass, but which, notwithstanding these drawbacks, looked comfortable and homelike.

The studio was a modern addition, built by Mark Stretton himself, about a year or so before the gray winter's day on which he was singing "My Queen" between the pauses of his work. He had occupied the old house for some years; but until the last two Mark's funds had not permitted him the luxury of a real studio, such as he possessed now.

And a real studio it was in its artistic litter and picturesque untidiness, with its statuettes and bronzes, and lay figures and quaint vases and fantastic draperies, and all the other paraphernalia which are part and parcel of every artist's stock-in-trade, while portfolios bursting with sketches and unfinished pictures, with their faces turned to the wall, spoke for the industry of the studio's occupant.

He was a big, loosely-built man who wore his velvet painting-coat with an air of careless grace, and who looked as if it would be impossible for him to feel at ease in the conventional frock-coat and chimney-pot hat of civilisation. He was not handsome, for his features were irregular, almost rugged, and his dark gray thoughtful eyes very deep-set under their heavy black brows; but there was something singularly and unusually attractive about his face. He looked so strong and yet so gentle, so true and steadfast, and earnest, that even strangers passing the big, carelessly-attired man in the streets were compelled to turn and look at him, and give him a passing thought as well as glance.

Mark Stretton always looked to most advantage in his painting-coat; and, as the fire-light fell upon him, it lighted up a picturesque and thoroughly artistic figure. His thick dark hair pushed carelessly back from his broad lined forehead, and just a suspicion of a smile peeping from under his heavy moustache.

"It is like her of course," he said softly to himself, as he stood contemplating his work—"like her undoubtedly; but not even Millais himself could give her face its full beauty, because," he added dreamily, "its chief beauty lies in those charming expressions of hers. I suppose really, if one went by strict rules and canons of beauty, she is not beautiful; but I never heard any man question her rights to be called so yet."

It would have been difficult to do so if the original of the picture resembled her portrait, for the face upon which Mark's eyes rested so tenderly was a very charming one. Chestnut hair curling over a broad white brow, great dark velvety

eyes, lips a little proud perhaps, but not the less tender and sweet for their pride, were its chief characteristics; but a close observer would have thought more of its expression than of its features, so earnest and thoughtful was it, so proud, yet so gentle, so bright, yet with a subtle tinge of sadness and melancholy.

"I think it will do us both good," he said, drawing near the picture again, and touching with his brush the soft folds of velvet on the canvas. "Not that she needs anything to increase her fame, my pretty child; she is already only too famous, I think sometimes."

He ended with a little sigh, and there was a shadow on his brow; then, as he resumed his work, it disappeared; and he went on painting cheerfully and steadily, with a happy, dreaming, expectant look in his dark gray eyes and an expression on his lips as if they held some happy secret. After a little silence, he began to sing again, in a tender minor key this time.

"She is coming, my dove, my dear;
She is coming, my life, my fair.
The red rose cries 'She is near,
And the white rose weeps 'She is late,'
The lark parlistsens—'I hear, I hear,'
And the lily whispers, 'I wait.'"

"She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat
Were it earth in an earthly bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead—
Would I start and tremble under her feet,
And bloom in purple and red."

Two little gloved hands were laid lightly upon his shoulder; and, as he glanced upwards with a slight flush colouring his dark skin, he met a pair of lovely smiling eyes like those on the canvas before him. He gave a little exclamation of surprise as he rose to greet her, with a swift look of joy in his gray eyes, before which Leslie Scott's eyes dropped a little, and when she lifted them again there was a troubled wistful expression in them which had not been there before.

"Mark, I hope I have not detained you," she said in a rich low voice, "I am sorry to be late, but we do not seem to get on with our rehearsal at all. It is a bitter morning! What a grand fire you have!"

She had given him her hand in greeting and had passed on to the fire, kneeling down on the Turkey rug thrown down before it, and holding out her hands to the blaze with a little shiver, while the ruddy light of the fire seemed to like to linger on her rich furs and graceful bowed head, turning her chestnut hair into rich red gold.

"You are cold, my dear?" Mark said gently.

"Just a little; the theatre was not properly heated. Do you know, Mark"—turning to him with a little laugh—"Mr. Grainger thinks my dress so very becoming that he wants me to wear something in the same style in our new play."

She had removed her hat and jacket by this time, and stood, a slight, graceful figure, clad in a quaintly cut dress of Venetian red velvet, with a Vandyke collar round her throat, her elbow-sleeves trimmed with rich old point-lace; and certainly no more becoming dress could have been chosen for the wearer, from whom it may be that it borrowed much of its grace and charm.

"This is my last sitting, Mark, is it not?" she asked, as she crossed the room in her soft unrustling draperies and sat down in the high-backed arm-chair, turning her face to the light as she did so.

"The picture can be finished without you now," he answered with a little sigh—the sittings had been hours of unmixed happiness to Mark Stretton. "I dare say you are glad, dear; they must have

been a tax to you, and you have so much to do always. How are the girls, Leslie?"

"All well," she replied, smiling. "Dora busy as usual, Jenay practising fiercely, and Midge going to her work so bravely every morning!"

Mark glanced at her quickly, wondering if she remembered how hard she had toiled herself, and how uncomplainingly, for five long years, enduring, not the smiles and affection of two sunny-haired, blue-eyed pupils, but the labour and discouragement and hard study and the jealousy and dislike and admiration worse than either, which must fall to the lot of an actress. But there was no recollection of those trials on her face as the light fell upon it.

She was pale, certainly, and her cheeks had lost some of their girlish roundness, and sometimes, but not this morning, her lips had a pathetic little droop; but today her face seemed to have a new softness and tenderness, which Mark had sometimes given it in his dreams, but which he had never before seen here. There was something wonderfully sweet in the set of the red lips.

"I am afraid you are a little bit glad, Leslie."

She looked up, starting a little as his voice broke the silence which had fallen upon the room.

"Glad!" she repeated in a puzzled tone. "Why am I glad, Mark?"

"Because your sittings are over."

"But I am not glad!" she said eagerly. "I am so fond of this dear old room"—glancing around the studio with an affectionate smile. "It is such a charming place, and I often think of the pleasant times we have all spent here, and our delightful afternoon teas, and—Why are you looking at me so steadily, Mark?"

"May not an artist look at this model?" he asked, smiling a little at the startled look which had come into her eyes as she asked the question. "And there is something unusual about you to-day," he went on meditatively. "You are not the Leslie of last week. I believe it is because you have your gloves on, and I am accustomed to see your arm bare."

"Oh, I have left my gloves on?" she said hurriedly, colouring vividly all over the creamy pallor of her face. "I did—I will take them off."

She had on long tan-coloured suede gloves, covering all her arm, which had been left bare by the short sleeves of her dress, and, as she spoke, she began pulling off the glove from her little right hand with rather unsteady fingers, the colour coming and going in her face, as she did so.

"That seems a work of difficulty," he remarked, marvelling a little at the perturbation visible in her manner, usually so calm and self-possessed. "Perhaps you had better not trouble to take them off, Leslie."

The right handed glove was removed by this time; she paused then, glancing at him with a relieved expression on her face.

"You can manage without?" she said dubiously.

"Certainly; the arm is finished, Leslie."

"There was a short silence then; the tender light had died out of her face, leaving it thoughtful and somewhat grave, and she was absently pulling the fingers of the gloves she held. Once or twice, glancing up at her suddenly, Mark saw her eyes fixed upon him with a wistful questioning expression, but when their glances met she coloured slightly and dropped her eyes again on to the little glove. After a time, her silence and abstraction being so unusual, he in his turn glanced at her questioningly, and then as if answering that mute inquiry, she began to talk eagerly about the new play which they were rehearsing and the superb scenery on which Mr. Grainger was sparing no expense.

"I think it will be a success, after all she said, "and my part suits me exactly ;

you know Mr. Robson wrote it for me, so I shall have one more role to add to my repertoire."

"Only one! You speak as if you were going to give up the stage, Leslie, and I suppose nothing would induce you to do that?"

"Do I?" she said, with a laugh and another sudden vivid blush, which faded, leaving her very pale, though she made no other answer to his speech, but went on chatting gaily about the play and giving him some quotations from it which had struck her. Had Mark Stretton been less absorbed just then, he might have thought that she seemed anxious to prevent him from speaking much to her, and have noticed the almost feverish gaiety of her manner.

A quaint Dresden china clock on a bracket struck one, and Leslie started a little and rose. Mark, from his seat at the easel, glanced over at her and smiled.

"I told you you were glad," he said gently as he rose also and followed her to the fire.

For perhaps a minute they stood together in silence on the Turkey rug, the artist very pale and grave and earnest, his heart throbbing fast, his lips quivering a little under the heavy moustache, the actress a little flushed and with an expression of wistful anxiety in the depths of her beautiful eyes.

"When are you coming to the 'Sisterhood'?" she asked abruptly.

"I have come very often," he returned, smiling. "Too often I think sometimes, when I am afraid of wearing out my welcome."

"As if you could do that, Mark!" she said indignantly. "As if by any possibility you could do that!"

"That is a kind speech, Leslie," he answered unsteadily.

"Reward me for it by coming soon," she rejoined, smiling, then added earnestly—"Oh, Mark, you know we have no friend so kind and true and faithful as you have been all these years."

"Leslie!"

He caught her hands in his as he uttered her name, and held them closely and tenderly as he went on hurriedly—

"Leslie, may I tell you now what I have wanted to tell you many times during our long friendship—But—what is it, dear? Have I startled you with my rough ways?"

She was very pale now; even the sweet quivering lips were white, but she spoke quickly.

"In one minute; let me tell you something first, Mark. Dora wanted to write to you, but I thought I would like to tell you myself."

Tears were in the sweet eyes now—tears which made his heart beat more quickly, although, seeing them, he might have guessed.

"What is it, Leslie?" he said, smiling down at her, and without a word she drew her hands away, and slowly, with reluctant little fingers, she began pulling off the other glove which still remained on the left hand. There was so much meaning in the manner in which she did it that Mark must have looked down at her hand as she laid it upon his arm, even if he had not caught the gleam and flash of diamonds; which reflected the firelight as the flames sprang up the chimney. On the third finger of the unsteady hand which she placed timidly on his black velvet sleeve was a broad flashing hoop of diamonds of considerable value.

Even then for a moment Mark would not see what she meant; for one wild, mad moment he put away the thought, the most natural one to arise in the circumstances, that the diamonds were a pledge of some promise given and received, the outward pledge of her betrothal to some more fortunate man. Even then, feeling his heart sink like lead, he smiled down at her, and, taking the little unsteady hands in his, said gently—