

## A FOOTLIGHT FAVORITE.

## CHAPTER IV.

The drawing-room, softly lighted with wax candles in silver sconces, and, fragrant from the flowers which adorned it with such profusion, was empty when Beatrice Ferris entered it, on the evening of Leslie Scott's arrival at Oakhampton. Dinner was not yet over; but Bee had excused herself from the long, stately, and ceremonious meal, her swoon in the afternoon being the reason. She might have excused herself also from any appearance that evening; but she felt, poor child, as if it would be easier to meet Leslie Scott—happy, fortunate, triumphant Leslie—in the soft-shaded light of the dainty drawing-room than in the full glare of day.

Lying still and motionless on her little white bed, where she had dreamed so many dreams of love and joy, she had heard the wheels of the carriage returning from the station, bringing Sir Hugh and his fiancée; but she had not risen to look out at their happiness and her beauty; she had only buried her pale face in her pillows and cried a little, pitying herself weakly and childishly, and hating Leslie with unreasoning hatred. When her maid had come to dress her, she had been full of the beauty and grace of Miss Scott, and had described in admiring terms the delicate gray travelling dress and hat she wore. Bee had listened in silence, making no comment, and letting the maid follow her own taste in her selection of the dress she would; and the woman had chosen nicely, for the rose-tint of her evening-dress gave Bee's white cheeks a faint reflected glow, preventing the pallor from being remarked.

It was a very dainty delicate Bee who entered the drawing room, with a slow, languid step, and sank down in a low chair at the farther end of the room, half concealed by the costly lace curtains which shaded the windows, and waited with a quickly beating heart and tremulous lips.

She had not long to wait. Presently the doors were thrown open, and Bee's watching eyes saw them come in, Lady Forsyth and Miss Scott. Neither Sir Hugh nor Mark was with them, and Bee felt a swift relief in the thought that he would not be present when she met his love. She sat still, watching them come forward, Lady Forsyth very stately in her black satin and lace, Leslie so graceful and artistic in her soft clinging lace-trimmed dress of creamy Indian muslin, with laces at her throat, and shading the semi-bare white arms, her only spot of colour a deep red rose which nestled in her bosom.

She was beautiful. Bee's jealous eyes saw the strange charm of her uncommon face, the matchless grace of her movements; but they saw too that she looked pale and almost grave, and there was a little pathetic droop about her lips, as if some painful thought were near.

Lady Forsyth's dark eyes went swiftly round the drawing-room, rested on Bee for a moment, and with an encouraging smile she motioned her to come forward. Bee did so, her fair face aflame with colour now, her eyes bright with her intense suppressed excitement, her rose-silk draperies trailing softly after her as she walked.

"This is my daughter," Lady Forsyth said, taking Bee's hand in hers; and as for one moment Leslie's velvety brown eyes looked at the beautiful, blushing little face, a swift sudden gleam of consciousness sprang into them, as if the very sight of the young girl's wonderful loveliness had explained something which had puzzled her.

"This is my daughter," repeated Lady Forsyth; and Leslie put out her hand, and then, with a sudden impulse, bent forward—she was much taller than Bee—and put her lips, her sweet true, generous

lips, to the girl's white brow, and at that kiss the hatred which Bee had been cherishing in her aching passionate heart died out for ever.

"How is it Hugh never spoke to me of you?" Leslie questioned gently, in her musical voice, as she looked at the lovely flower-like face with dreamy far away eyes. "He could hardly have forgotten such a sister."

"Hugh never saw Bee until his return home a few months since," answered Lady Forsyth hastily. "She came to me during his absence abroad, and brightened my lonely life as I could not have hoped to have it brightened during Hugh's absence."

"And it is your picture that Mr. Stretton is painting?" said Leslie slowly. "I can imagine what pleasure he must have in such a task," she added, with a little smile.

"He is a good artist," said Lady Forsyth, with a touch of condescension in her haughty manner. "He has been very successful in your own portrait. I understand he has nothing in the Academy this year. How is that?"

"He intended my picture for the Academy," Leslie answered, colouring slightly.

"Indeed! Why was it not exhibited?"

"Hugh did not wish," Leslie replied, the faint colour deepening.

"Mr. Stretton is a very old friend of yours?" Lady Forsyth asked coolly.

"Yes, and my cousin," Leslie returned quietly. "The oldest and best friend we have."

A little silence followed this remark. Lady Forsyth had sunk on a sofa, and was resting languidly upon the silken cushions; the two girls were standing almost side by side, Leslie tall and graceful and lovely, Bee beautiful as a poet's dream, in her rose-hued draperies. Lady Forsyth was looking at them through her black lashes thoughtfully and critically, and her glance as it rested on Leslie, was neither severe or unkind.

Leslie pleased her; angry as she was at her son's choice, pitiful as she felt towards the girl whom she loved and whom she had destined for his wife, still Leslie pleased her. She liked her face, with its rare charm of expression and beautiful dark eyes. She liked her manner, so perfectly well-bred and faultless in its graceful self-possession, her voice so sweet and musical and pleasant. She did not wonder at her son's infatuation; but she did wonder—even as Mark Stretton had done more than once—how, having loved Leslie and been loved by her—by this woman, so fair and gentle, and true, he should have ceased to love her for the sake of this beautiful golden-haired child who lacked so many of her rival's charms.

Two servants brought in coffee, and were followed almost immediately by the two young men, Sir Hugh looking flushed and brilliant, Mark moody and dissatisfied, as they came up to the pretty little group near the window. Both girls changed colour as they appeared, but, while Bee blushed a rosy red, Leslie grew very pale.

"I am glad to see you better, Miss Ferris," Mark said gently.

"Has she been ill?" Leslie asked in her pretty caressing fashion. "She looks very well now."

"Yes, but the heat tries her," Lady Forsyth put in quickly. "Hugh, I forget; did you tell me whether Miss Scott sang or played?"

Something in her voice stung Mark as he stood by silent; it stung Sir Hugh also, in all probability, for his cheeks flushed angrily.

"I forgot whether you asked me," he said carelessly. "But it is not too late to tell you that she does both, Leslie"

—his voice changed and softened as he turned to her—"will you sing for us, dear? I should like to hear you again."

He had spoken very gently, and with a graceful deference which was pretty to see; but perhaps Leslie missed the old fond tenderness which had so often thrilled her during their friendship, for she hesitated a little.

"Perhaps you are tired?" Lady Forsyth said inquiringly.

"Will it be troubling you too much, dear?" Sir Hugh asked, bending his handsome head over her.

"Not at all," she responded gently. "I will sing if you wish it, Hugh."

She put her hand within his arm to go to the piano, and Mark saw how jealousy Bee watched them. Since the young man had entered the room Sir Hugh had neither spoken to nor looked at his mother's adopted daughter; but perhaps he could see the fair troubled face for all that.

Leslie sat down at the piano, running her fingers softly over the keys, with a touch and style which made Lady Forsyth lift her black eyebrows.

Sir Hugh had drawn up a chair beside the piano, and was sitting leaning slightly forward, his head on his hand, his eyes on Leslie's fair, dreaming face, his thoughts—where?

Mark had gone over to an open window, and was standing there, silent and preoccupied; Bee, feeling lonely and deserted, nestled amidst some silken cushions, and tried to keep the tell-tale lips from quivering, the blue eyes from filling with tears. It was very hard, she thought wearily, recalling the other evenings spent in the stately drawing-room, when Lady Forsyth dozed over her crewels and Sir Hugh had lingered by her side and talked so softly, and sang to her in a tender minor key! Now she was forgotten; he had no thought for her, all his care and tenderness and attention were given to another, to one who had a right to them, a perfect right, while she was left "out in the cold."

Meanwhile Leslie played on softly, and Hugh, watching her in silence, looking at the dreamy eyes and white throat and shining chestnut hair, started a little as she turned to him.

"You have been well all these long weeks?" she said gently; it was almost the first opportunity of private speech with him she had had, for during their drive from the station his attention had been claimed by his horses, which were fresh and spirited, and there had not been much chance of conversation.

"Oh, yes, very well! And you, Leslie?"

"I have been well," she answered softly; but, as he looked at her, he could see that the soft cheeks were thinner than they should have been, and that there were dark circles round her beautiful eyes.

"Yet you are thinner and paler, dear," he said, with a touch of remorse in his voice.

"I was never very stout or very rosy, Hugh. Why did you not tell me of the beautiful young sister I should find here?" she said softly, turning her eyes upon his face with a look of enquiry.

"I suppose I had something else to speak of, Leslie," he answered hurriedly. "I am afraid you have been working too hard lately."

"No," she replied calmly. "I have not been doing more than usual."

"But that is too much, far too much," he said impatiently. "Leslie, I wish you would gratify me in this. Do give up your profession—"

"I am under engagements which I cannot break," she interrupted gently. "You remember we spoke of this before, Hugh. You must let me keep my independence until—until" her voice faltered somewhat—"until I am your wife, dear."

"I hate to think of you on the stage," he rejoined, in the same impatient, pe-

tulant manner; "to think that any one who likes has a right to criticise and comment and admire and censure? Leslie, do give it up, dear, if you love me."

"I do love you," she answered very gently. "But because I love you, I cannot give up an old friend who has been very good to me, and my profess is that to me, Hugh."

"And you will not give it up for me?"

"No, dear, not even for you."

"I believe you like the excitement and applause and admiration," he said moodily.

Leslie laughed. "Perhaps I do," she answered lightly, as she lifted her hands from the piano and crossed them in her lap.

Lady Forsyth turned to ask if she were not going to sing.

"You play charmingly, my dear," she said graciously, "and, if you sing equally well, I shall think you have all the accomplishments."

A moment's hesitation, then the little jewelled fingers sought the white keys once more. Months afterwards her hearers remembered the words of her song.

"Strew on her roses, roses,  
And never a spray of yew,  
In quiet she reposes—  
Ah, would that I did too!

"Her mirth the world required,  
She bathes it in smiles of glee;  
But her heart was tired, tired,  
And now they let her be.

"Her life was turning, turning  
In mazes of heat and sound;  
But for peace her soul was yearning,  
And now peace laps her round.

"Her cabin'd, ample spirit,  
It flutter'd and failed for breath;  
To-night it doth inherit  
The vasty hall of death."

As the rich voice died away and Leslie rose, they all looked at her in silence for a moment; she was very pale, but she was smiling, and she looked strangely beautiful.

"Thank you, my dear," Lady Forsyth said. "That is a pretty song, but very sad."

"Do you think it sad?" Leslie asked, smiling. "It seems to me such a happy song. Miss Ferris, do you not sing?"

"Yes, Bee sings, but not like you," said Lady Forsyth hastily. "Do not leave the piano, my dear. At the risk of being importunate, I will ask you to sing again. You have given me much pleasure."

A flush of gratification rose in Leslie's cheek at the gracious and kindly words; and she glanced at her lover to see if he shared her pleasure. He was looking moody and dissatisfied, his eyes were downcast, and he was restlessly pulling at his long fair mustache, with strong unsteady fingers. The brightness died out of Leslie's face as she sat down again, and once more her rich soft voice rose, filling the room with melody. This time she sang some pretty graceful ballad, a love-song with a tender passionate refrain, which ran thus—

"Some day, some day, I shall meet you—  
Love, I know not when or how—  
Only this, only this, this that once you loved me,  
Only this, I love you now, I love you now, I love you now!"

As the sweet tender strain died away, Leslie glanced at Sir Hugh once more. This time there was no moodiness, no abstraction on his face, and his blue eyes, with a passionate eager light in their depths, a light of adoring love, were fixed upon Bee's face. As they rested there she lifted hers; ere she dropped them again, they had answered the light in his, and that one look told all, not only to the man who had fought against his love and tried to be loyal, but to the woman who loved him, and who in that