

A FOOTLIGHT FAVORITE.

CHAPTER VII.

"Sit down, Hugh," Leslie said gently, as soon as they were alone—"sit down and listen to me, Hugh."

He threw himself moodily into a chair, leaning his head on his hand. Leslie stood by, slim and stately in her rich velvet dress, very pale, very sorrowful, suffering, poor girl, more deeply than it was possible for him to suffer.

"You are angry with me," she said softly; "but indeed you have no cause. Hugh, you remember, do you not, a few words which passed between us on the morning I left Oakhampton? I told you"—she spoke with difficulty now and only by a strong effort retained her self-control, and forced the parched and quivering lips to obey her—"that there was one role I could not perform, one part I did not choose to fill, and you told me you would never ask me to fill it, Hugh."

"I am not asking you to fill it, Leslie," he urged passionately, as he caught her hands and drew him towards him—"I am not. I love you—I love you!"

He dropped his head upon her hands as they held hers, as the words broke from him, and he felt the shiver which made Leslie quiver from head to foot.

"Yes, you love me," she answered gently. "I do not doubt that, Hugh, neither do I doubt your truth and faith; but"—she removed her hands as she spoke, and the low sweet tones grew a little unsteady—"do you love me as a man should love the woman he is going to make his wife? Do you love me even as well as you loved me six months ago, when you asked me to be your wife?"

"Leslie," he exclaimed fervently, "on my honor, on my life, I have not been unfaithful to you; no word has ever passed—"

"Have I not told you that I do not doubt your truth?" she said earnestly. "I know that even now you would make me your wife, and you would give me all that a wife can claim of honor and respect and care and tenderness, all save the love which is not yours to give now. But, dear, I asked for none of these things, nor for your wealth and luxury and position; and the thing I did ask for, and which I, as your wife, should have had a sacred right to claim, you cannot give, and I will have none of the rest."

"Leslie, you hurt me!" he said, in a low broken voice of pain, stirred to his inmost soul by her tone no less than her words; and at the anguish in his voice her own calmness broke down.

"I hurt you?" she cried, with a choked passionate sob—"I hurt you, Hugh. I?" And she sank down kneeling beside him, and tried to remove the hands with which he had covered his face. "I hurt you?" she repeated piteously. "Ah, do not say that, Hugh—do not say that!"

All the manhood in him rose at the piteous broken cry. By the power of her own faithfulness and truth she forced him to be true. Lifting his head and uncovering his face, he looked at her, full of pain and remorse and suffering.

"Listen to me, Leslie," he said hoarsely; "let me tell you the truth. I have been a coward too long and a traitor. I was a traitor to ask you, whom I did not truly love, to be my wife. I was unworthy then, but still more unworthy now, of any kind thoughts of yours. You are better a thousand times than I am, more faithful, truer, nobler, purer, and Heaven knows that I honor you from my soul; and if you will take me, unworthy as I am, my whole life to come will be devoted to your happiness and the endeavor to blot out my treachery and shame. Leslie, I am a weak, guilty coward, unworthy, Heaven knows, of any woman's love; but, if you will try me once more, dear, and forget the past, I will be true."

He was pale to ghastliness as he

speaking, and his voice was low and husky. It had cost him much to utter the words he had spoken, to humble himself, to confess his weakness and cowardice, and Leslie measured the cost as she looked at the white and haggard face, the dim eyes, the unsteady hands. She was standing beside him now, her face full of pity and tenderness, her eyes soft and misty with unshed tears; she leaned slightly towards him, and put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"And Bee?" she said with a little tremulous smile. "Is her heart to be broken, Hugh?"

He uttered a hoarse exclamation of passionate pain, and half arose; but the gentle pressure on his shoulder prevented him, light as it was, and the sweet eyes looking at him so gravely silenced the agitated words that arose to his lips.

"Why should three lives be spoiled?" she said gently—"yours and hers and my own, Hugh? We made—you and I—a great mistake some months ago; but it is not too late to repair it, so that all three may be happy, instead of miserable. Go back to the pretty innocent child whose heart is yours, and whom you love, and make her happy. Tell her from me that you have been far truer to me than I deserved, since I knew from the first that we were wrong; tell her also that no one wishes her all happiness more sincerely than I do, that I am glad to have seen you together in your beautiful home. Ah, Hugh, its beauty and grandeur would have stifled a Bohemian such as I am! You must leave me to the profession you have often said I loved better than you, and think of me as your true friend. There," she said hurriedly—"that is all; there is nothing more to say, and we are both tired."

Her voice, which had been low and faint and broken, failed her suddenly; but she smiled down at him with dim and heavy eyes. Looking up at her and seeing the change in her face, the shadow of intense anguish in her eyes, he broke in to a great cry for pardon.

"Oh, Leslie, forgive me, forgive me!" he said, catching her in his arms as she stood beside him; and, as he did so, the unwonted suffering and remorse found vent, as they might have done in a woman—and indeed there was much of woman's nature in inconstant, generous Hugh Forsyth—he dropped his head on her shoulder, and burst into tears.

Very pale and trembling, Leslie bent over him in silence, waiting until he had conquered the weakness which had overcome him. When at length he raised his head, she pushed the disordered hair from his forehead and touched it with her lips; then, gently disengaging herself, she moved towards the door.

"You are not going, Leslie?" Sir Hugh said, in a low voice of great exhaustion and weakness.

She glanced back at him and smiled. "No," she said, "for a minute only."

She was absent only long enough to fetch some wine, and to ask Mark to come in half an hour—Sir Hugh would be ready then, she said, calmly.

She went back to the drawing-room with the same rapt compassionate look on her face which had made it seem like the face of an angel in Mark's sight as she spoke to him. Sir Hugh was pacing up and down the little room with hasty uneven steps, his face haggard and worn like the face of a man who had undergone a long illness. She urged him gently to take some wine, seeing in what need he was of some support, then made him rest until Mark came.

When Mark entered the room, half an hour after, Sir Hugh was sitting on the sofa deathly pale, but calm and sad. Leslie, sitting beside him, his hand clasping

hers, looked wan and haggard in the soft lamp-light.

"Hugh is ready," she said, turning to Mark. "We will say good-night and good-bye now."

He rose mechanically, as if acting in obedience to her voice, and she gave him her hand with a little smile which seemed to Mark sadder than any tears he had ever seen shed.

"Hugh is thinking of going abroad," she went on, turning to Mark, "and we shall not see him for a little while. He quite understands that we are now what we shall always be, friends—and friends only. Now go," she said, her voice trembling a little. "It is very late, and I am tired." Then, seeing that Sir Hugh hesitated, she added hastily—"That is all; good-bye, Mark; go now, for pity's sake!"

And, without a word, Mark put his hand within the young man's arm and led him, unresisting, away. The moon was shining upon the little pathway, as Mark opened the hall door; outside on the deserted road the hansom waited motionless, casting a weird shadow on the roadside.

"Go back; they may want you," Sir Hugh said huskily. "Go back; and, Mark, if you can—forgive me."

He went hastily down the pathway, his step hurried and uneven. Mark turned slowly into the little hall, where Dora met him, pale and anxious, and they entered the drawing-room together.

Leslie was standing where he had left her, quite still and motionless, her velvet dress falling in long soft folds upon the carpet, the filmy lace still surrounding her face. As they went in, she looked at them with a strange, vacant, unseeing stare in her brown eyes.

"Leslie," Dora said gently, "it is very late, dear."

A faint gleam of comprehension crept into his bewildered eyes, then deepened as they turned on Mark; the sight of him recalled all she had endured during the past hour.

"Yes, it is very late," she answered, "and you must be tired, Dolly. I am very tired," she added, in a voice of inexpressible weariness, as she went towards the door, and, leaving the room, passed into the hall.

She did not falter or tremble; but, as he watched her movements, Mark was reminded of a friend, a German student at Munich, who had been mortally wounded in a duel, but who had crossed the field steadily, then paused, and dropped dead.

Leslie walked in the same stiff mechanical manner, Mark thought as he followed her, and even as the wounded man had done, suddenly, and without warning the girl dropped at the foot of the stairs before Mark could arrest her fall.

She was quite conscious when he lifted her; she had not fainted, but she was weak and strengthless as an infant.

"Carry her to her room," Dolly said, as she followed; and Mark did so, turning the stricken face against his breast.

He laid her on the white bed in silence, and she strove to smile at him with her pale lips and whisper a word of thanks as he turned away and left her to her broken heart, and went out alone into the moonlit night.

CHAPTER VIII, AND LAST.

Playgoers in general and *habitués* of the Star Theatre in particular said that Miss Lettice Soames had never acted more brilliantly than she did that autumn. The new play, the principal role of which Mr. Robson, the popular playwright, had written expressly for Leslie, was a very great success, and had a long-continued run, and not once was the young actress absent from her place on the boards, although such an unbroken spell of work could not fail to try a frame so delicate as hers.

But Leslie felt that hard work was the

ly panacea for the pain she endured during the weeks of utter blankness and darkness which followed the rupture of her engagement to Sir Hugh Forsyth. It was only by a fierce effort of application that she could give her mind to the study of her profession, and she clung to it desperately, as a drowning man clings to a spar, even when he knows there is no chance of safety. Her wound was a mortal one, and, if it bled inwardly only, was none the less severe for that; but she was a brave woman, true and faithful, and she fought wildly against her despair, although there was in her life many an hour when to lay down her weapons and cease the strife would have seemed to her the height of all ambition and the attainment of all bliss.

When, in the sunny climes where Sir Hugh went to forget his wounded pride and regain his lost self-respect, he thought of Leslie, he tried to assure himself that she had never really cared for him, that she was too cold to love, that she had no thought but for her profession. He knew in his heart that he was wrong, and there were times when the last glance of her beautiful eyes haunted him with a terrible persistence; but when, in the early winter, he returned to Oakhampton, he forgot all else in the sunshine of Bee's smiles, in the light of her blue eyes, so full of adoring love and trust, and in the worship of the innocent heart of the sweet child-wife who had given him a love as deep and passionate as it could feel.

Leslie read of the marriage in the papers with a quiver of her firm lips; it seemed to her a little cruel that he had not written himself to tell her; he might have guessed that she would like to hear of it from himself, not through the papers, as if she were a stranger; but she said nothing, and, passing the paper over to Dora as they sat together in the pretty drawing room where Leslie had endured her agony, pointed to the paragraph without any comment.

She looked pale and thin and fragile as the weeks went by; there were dark shadows under her eyes, and sometimes, brushing out the pretty chestnut hair, she would smile sadly to find here and there a gleaming silver thread.

"A woman's life is over when she finds her first gray hair," she had read somewhere; but, even when all is gone from life which makes it precious and valuable, one must live on; rest does not come merely for the asking. Death's sickle often mows down the bright wheat-ears, and passes over the sickly, blighted, and drooping ears untouched.

Leslie, though she looked so pale and fragile, complained of no illness; and her sisters were inclined to ascribe the alteration in her appearance to the fatigue and excitement of her daily life, for in her insatiable desire for occupation she had undertaken the principal character in a new play to appear at the New Year, and there were constant rehearsals and much study required. Dora, perhaps, was the only one who noticed how disinclined she was to go to rest at night. Even when she returned fatigued to exhaustion from the theatre, she always lingered, and was always the last to suggest bed time.

"The nights are so long," she said wearily once, "one need not make them longer."

The younger girls were too much absorbed in their own affairs and too heedless perhaps, much as they loved Leslie, to be anxious in the change in her. Jenny was devoted to her music, in which she was making considerable progress and bade fair to have much success; and Madge, bright, ugly, Madge, had a lover of her own in the person of a rising young doctor, the step-brother of her little pupils; whose father, a man highly distinguished in the medical profession, was charmed with his son's choice and had offered no opposition to an engagement between them. And Leslie had taken so much tender interest in this love affair, and had