



THE MAYOR'S PARLOR

By

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OUTSIDE, the streets lay wrapped in a mantle of snow, but in the Mayor's parlour blazed a glorious fire of logs that sent flames of blue and green and orange hissing up the wide-mouthed chimney.

The light flickered in the distant corners of the room, striking out reflections from the polished mahogany furniture. On the centre-table stood a tall blue jar, containing a spray of Christmas roses. They made pallid reflections on the wood, and conveyed a sense of austere beauty wholly satisfying to the eye.

From where he sat at his writing-table the Mayor's glance rested upon them, and, as he looked, the stern lines of his face softened perceptibly. He laid down his pen and took a turn or two across the hearthrug. The hands of the clock upon the mantelpiece now pointed to seven minutes past the hour. The Mayor frowned a little and, putting out his foot, stirred the logs impatiently, sending a myriad green and rose-coloured sparks flying up into the recesses of the chimney.

"Ill-regulated in that as in other things," he said to himself, when the clock's face showed ten minutes past the hour. "She was always heedless."

There came a tap upon the door, followed the next moment by the entrance of the person for whom he had been waiting.

In her wrappings of velvet and ermine she made a vivid, sumptuous little figure as she advanced towards him, seeming to fall in with the perfection of the room. Her eyes held a gleam of laughter; upon the masses of dark hair under her ermine cap frost particles glistened in the fire-light. Her lips curved in a smile that was wholly disarming as she held towards him a small, gloved hand.

In spite of his anger the Mayor's stern face relaxed. Then he hardened his heart. Dropping her hand, he put his own out to switch on the electric light, but she made a movement to stop him.

"Please don't. The light from the fire is so beautiful. Besides"—she slipped out of her long coat and threw it across a chair—"it seems more friendly than the glare, and of course"—she moved, a slender, girlish figure, towards the hearth, holding out her hands to the heat, and looking at him over her shoulder as she went—"of course, you mean to scold me."

THE Mayor stood beside the centre-table and looked down at the Christmas roses. In her present mood it was impossible to be angry with her. There was a glimmer of tears now instead of laughter in the dark eyes, and a downward droop of the lips that he remembered well. But this was no time for softening. He walked over to his revolving chair and sat down, hoping to gain some moral support from its touch. He had been foolish to leave the room to the leaping firelight; it weakened his purpose to see her there just as in the old days, when he, with others, had done his part to spoil her.

Virginia gave a little frown.

"Please don't sit over there," she said; "it makes you seem so strange, so unfamiliar."

"Everything has become strange and unfamiliar between us," said the Mayor, sternly.

"No," said Virginia, an emphatic, almost passionate, ring in her tones, "no!"

With a swift movement she turned from him and put her head against the arm of the big chair in which she was almost lost. The firelight lingered on the nape of her white neck, and seemed to enwrap the little figure in its warmth.

The Mayor's heart ached as it had not ached since his wife's death. He remembered that she had always made allowances for Virginia. He sighed involuntarily, and stirred in his chair. At the sound Virginia sat erect and put her absurd little gossamer handkerchief to her eyes.

"I will listen to everything if you will only come and sit here," she said, in a subdued tone. "Over there you seem so stern, so unapproachable. As my guardian—"

The Mayor rose and came nearer.

"My responsibility ceased when you married," he said. "You are beyond my jurisdiction now. But I thought, I hoped—"

"Yes, yes," Virginia spoke eagerly, "you were right to think so. I shall always look upon you as my guardian. If you will sit down here I will listen to all the stern things you have to say, but I will stop my ears if you talk from over there. Now we're really cosy."

IN some strange fashion she always secured her way. The Mayor submitted to her will, and in the leaping firelight his face grew less grey and lined. He leaned forward with hands clasped tightly together, wishing that the task before him were more to his liking.

As they sat, the silence was only broken by the sound of distant footsteps passing along the corridors of the Town Hall. The snow seemed to muffle every stir of life within and without.

It was falling again, steadily, silently, a flake every now and then descending on the logs with a soft hissing sound.

Virginia, leaning her chin on her palm, looked deep into the heart of the fire. Suddenly the logs fell apart with a crash, and sent myriad sparks vanishing up the chimney. Virginia's glance followed them. As a child she used to clap her hands in delight at the sight, and she looked such a child still that the Mayor half expected her to behave in the same way now. Then he recollected that he had a part to play, and straightened himself in his chair. Virginia looked up.

"You know I always like to get disagreeable things over," she said, knitting her brows. "Please begin scolding. I shan't mind—very much."

"I have no desire to scold you," replied the Mayor, steeling his heart against her. "I asked you to come to-day that I might endeavour to bring you to a sense of duty."

"Duty!" She echoed the word with slow emphasis. "Duty! That always has a dreary, disagreeable sound. Do you remember, years ago—"

The Mayor stirred uneasily in his place. "It is the present with which we have to deal," he said, "not the past, Virginia."

She gave a quick sigh.

"And the future. The present, to all intents and purposes, is settled, but the future—"

"You are still determined to leave your husband? Think well, Virginia."

The hands clasped together in her lap tightened involuntarily. "I have thought and thought—"

"Probably it is only a little thing that has come between you? I imagined that you were greatly attached to one another."

Virginia turned her head in the other direction.

"When we married," her voice shook a little—"when we married we were just desperately in love with one another. On Harry's side it was evidently too desperate to last. I come in a bad second now, with his work. He seems to find me an incubus. He shall not have to complain long. He has positively reached the point of grudging me any amusement. He dictates to me about my expenditure."

The Mayor's glance wandered to the costly garment lying across the chair-back.

SHE had no knowledge of the value of money. All her life she had spent lavishly. Perhaps it was the fault of himself and his wife. They should have been more strict in her upbringing, more stern in controlling her impulses.

"Harry was always the soul of generosity," he said.

"That was in the early days," said Virginia, with a bitter little laugh. "Nothing was too good for me then. Now he pays my bills reluctantly and attaches a lecture to every one. He is so absorbed in his business, too, that he has given up coming home until late, and he never goes to any amusement with me"—she knit her level brows in a frown—"and so—and so—I think it will be better if we separate."

"And has Harry no cause for complaint against you?"

"Only extravagance, and—and—" Virginia's voice faltered. Whatever her failings she was at least honest.

"And?"

"He dares to be jealous."

"And from what I hear, with some right." The Mayor rose, and, leaning against the mantelpiece, looked down into the lovely, rebellious face. "I understand that—"

"He has no cause to doubt me," Virginia's voice, interrupting him, held a passion of protest. "I should never—you know me better than to suppose—"

"Caesar's wife should be above suspicion," said the Mayor. "I realize that there is no harm in you, Virginia, but other people may not. You are self-willed and foolish. I fear—" his eyes turned to a portrait above his writing-table—"I fear we spoilt you, she and I—"

Virginia's eyes followed his own.

"Ah, if she were only here!" a sob breaking her voice, "she never would have doubted me; she was the only one that really understood. I miss her more and more every day. There is no one now, no one—to understand."

A tear fell from her eyes to her lap. The Mayor's face contracted. He put out his hand, and Virginia held on to it tightly, as a child grasps at a protecting touch.

"We both miss her more than words can say, and, for her sake, won't you tell me your troubles, Virginia? You are very young, and lives have been wrecked before now by trivial things. For her dear sake, as well as your own, I asked you to come here to-day. One does not interfere lightly between man and wife. They are best left to settle their own differences."

"Differences!" Virginia shook her head. "I feel as if every bit of happiness had gone now that Harry has ceased to care for me. You naturally can't enter into what I feel, you and she were so devoted, nothing ever came between you."

IN the firelight the Mayor's face changed. A memory of many years ago came back to him. Virginia's hand was still in his. She could feel his own shaking.

"What is it?" she asked, momentarily forgetting her trouble. "I have said something to hurt you. I did not mean—"

The Mayor straightened himself with an air of resolve.

"I am going to tell you about something that happened many years ago. It was known only to her and myself. She would be glad for me to tell you, Virginia, if it held you back from an irrevocable