

# **The Mayor's Wife**

**by**

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## 1. A Spy's Duty

I am not without self-control, yet when Miss Davies entered the room with that air of importance she invariably assumes when she has an unusually fine position to offer, I could not hide all traces of my anxiety.

I needed a position, needed it badly, while the others--

But her eyes are on our faces, she is scanning us all with that close and calculating gaze which lets nothing escape. She has passed me by--my heart goes down, down--when suddenly her look returns and she singles me out.

"Miss Saunders." Then, "I have a word to say to you"

There is a rustle about me; five disappointed girls sink back into their seats as I quickly rise and follow Miss Davies out.

In the hall she faced me with these words:

"You are discreet, and you evidently desire a position. You will find a gentleman in my sitting-room. If you come to terms with him, well and good. If not, I shall expect you to forget all about him and his errand the moment you leave his presence. You understand me?"

"I think so," I replied, meeting her steady look with one equally composed. Part of my strength--and I think I have some strength --lies in the fact that I am quietest when most deeply roused. "I am not to talk whatever the outcome."

"Not even to me," she emphasized.

Stirred still further and therefore outwardly even more calm than before, I stopped her as she was moving on and ventured a single query.

"This position--involving secrecy--is it one you would advise me to take, even if I did not stand in need of it so badly?"

"Yes. The difficulties will not be great to a discreet person. It is a first-class opportunity for a young woman as experienced as yourself."

"Thank you," was my abrupt but grateful rejoinder; and, obeying her silent gesture, I opened the door of the sitting-room and passed in. A gentleman standing at one of the windows turned quickly at the sound of my step and came forward. Instantly whatever doubt I may have felt concerning the nature of the

work about to be proposed to me yielded to the certainty that, however much it might involve of the strange and difficult, the man whose mission it was to seek my aid was one to inspire confidence and respect.

He was also a handsome man, or no, I will not go so far as that; he was only one in whom the lines of form and visage were fine enough not to interfere with the impression made by his strong nature and intense vitality. A man to sway women and also quite capable of moving men (this was evident at a glance); but a man under a cloud just at present,--a very heavy cloud which both irked and perplexed him.

Pausing in the middle of the room, he surveyed me closely for an instant before speaking. Did I impress him as favorably as he did me? I soon had reason to think so, for the nervous trembling of his hands ceased after the first moment or two of silent scrutiny, and I was sure I caught the note of hope in his voice as he courteously remarked:

"You are seeking a place, young lady. Do you think you can fill the one I have to offer? It has its difficulties, but it is not an onerous one. It is that of companion to my wife."

I bowed; possibly I smiled. I do smile sometimes when a ray of real sunshine darts across my pathway.

"I should be very glad to try such a situation," I replied.

A look of relief, so vivid that it startled me, altered at once the whole character of his countenance; and perceiving how intense was the power and fascination underlying his quiet exterior, I asked myself who and what this man was; no ordinary personage, I was sure, but who? Had Miss Davies purposely withheld his name? I began to think so.

"I have had some experience," I was proceeding--

But he waved this consideration aside, with a change back to his former gloomy aspect, and a careful glance at the door which did not escape me.

"It is not experience which is so much needed as discretion."

Again that word.

"The case is not a common one, or, rather,"--he caught himself up quickly, "the circumstances are not. My wife is well, but--she is not happy. She is very unhappy, deeply, unaccountably so, and I do not know why."

Anxious to watch the effect of these words, he paused a moment, then added fervently:

"Would to God I did! It would make a new man of me."

The meaning, the deep meaning in his tone, if not in the adjuration itself, was undeniable; but my old habit of self-control stood me in good stead and I remained silent and watchful, weighing every look and word.

"A week ago she was the lightest hearted woman in town,--the happiest wife, the merriest mother. To-day she is a mere wreck of her former self, pallid, drawn, almost speechless, yet she is not ill. She will not acknowledge to an ache or a pain; will not even admit that any change has taken place in her. But you have only to see her. And I am as ignorant of the cause of it all--as you are!" he burst out.

Still I remained silent, waiting, watchful.

"I have talked with her physician. He says there is something serious the matter with her, but he can not help her, as it is not in any respect physical, and advises me to find out what is on her mind. As if that had not been my first care! I have also consulted her most intimate friends all who know her well, but they can give me no clue to her distress. They see the difference in her, but can not tell the cause. And I am obliged to go away and leave her in this state. For two weeks, three weeks now, my movements will be very uncertain. I am at the beck and call of the State Committee. At any other time I would try change of scene, but she will neither consent to leave home without me nor to interrupt my plans in order that I may accompany her."

"Miss Davies has not told me your name," I made bold to interpolate.

He stared, shook himself together, and quietly, remarked:

"I am Henry Packard."

The city's mayor! and not only that, the running candidate for governor. I knew him well by name, even if I did not know, or rather had not recognized his face.

"I beg pardon," I somewhat tremulously began, but he waved the coming apology aside as easily, as he had my first attempt at ingratiating. In fact, he appeared to be impatient of every unnecessary word. This I could, in a dim sort of way, understand. He was at the crisis of his fate, and so was his party. For several years a struggle had gone on between the two nearly matched elements in this western city, which, so far, had resulted in securing him two terms of office--possibly because his character appealed to men of all grades and varying convictions. But the opposite party was strong in the state, and the question

whether he could carry his ticket against such odds, and thus give hope to his party in the coming presidential election, was one yet to be tested. Forceful as a speaker, he was expected to reap hundreds of votes from the mixed elements that invariably thronged to hear him, and, ignorant as I necessarily was of the exigencies of such a campaign, I knew that not only his own ambition, but the hopes of his party, depended on the speeches he had been booked to make in all parts of the state. And now, three weeks before election, while every opposing force was coming to the surface, this trouble had come upon him. A mystery in his home and threatened death in his heart! For he loved his wife--that was apparent to me from the first; loved her to idolatry, as such men sometimes do love,-- often to their own undoing.

All this, the thought of an instant. Meanwhile he had been studying me well.

"You understand my position," he commented. "Wednesday night I speak in C---, Thursday, in R---, while she--" With an effort he pulled himself together. "Miss--"

"Saunders," I put in.

"Miss Saunders, I can not leave her alone in the house. Some one must be there to guard and watch--"

"Has she no mother?" I suggested in the pause he made.

"She has no living relatives, and mine are uncongenial to her."

This to save another question. I understood him perfectly.

"I can not ask any of them to stay with her," he pursued decisively. "She would not consent to it. Nor can I ask any of her friends. That she does not wish, either. But I can hire a companion. To that she has already consented. That she will regard as a kindness, if the lady chosen should prove to be one of those rare beings who carry comfort in their looks without obtruding their services or displaying the extent of their interest. You know there are some situations in which the presence of a stranger may be more grateful than that of a friend. Apparently, my wife feels herself so placed now."

Here his eyes again read my face, an ordeal out of which I came triumphant; the satisfaction he evinced rightly indicated his mind.

"Will you accept the position?" he asked. "We have one little child. You will have no charge of her save as you may wish to make use of her in reaching the mother."

The hint conveyed in the last phrase gave me courage to say:

"You wish me to reach her?"

"With comfort," said he.

"And if in doing so I learn her trouble?"

"You will win my eternal gratitude by telling it to one who would give ten years of his life to assuage it."

My head rose. I began to feel that my next step must strike solid ground.

"In other words to be quite honest--you wish me to learn her trouble if I can"

"I believe you can be trusted to do so."

"And then to reveal it to you?"

"If your sense of duty permits,--which I think it will."

I might have uttered in reply, "A spy's duty?" but the high-mindedness of his look forbade. Whatever humiliation his wishes put upon me, there could be no question of the uprightness of his motives regarding his wife.

I ventured one more question.

"How far shall I feel myself at liberty to go in this attempt?"

"As far as your judgment approves and circumstances seem to warrant. I know that you will come upon nothing dishonorable to her, or detrimental to our relations as husband and wife, in this secret which is destroying our happiness. Her affection for me is undoubted, but something--God knows what--has laid waste her life. To find and annihilate that something is my first and foremost duty. It does not fit well with those other duties pressing upon me from the political field, does it? That is why I have called in help. That is why I have called you in."

The emphasis was delicately but sincerely given. It struck my heart and entered it. Perhaps he had calculated upon this. If so, it was because he knew that a woman like myself works better when her feelings are roused.

Answering with a smile, I waited patiently while he talked terms and other equally necessary details, then dropping all these considerations, somewhat in his own grand manner, I made this remark:

"If your wife likes me, which very possibly she may fail to do, I shall have a few questions to ask you before I settle down to my duties. Will you see that an opportunity is given me for doing this?"

His assent was as frank as all the rest, and the next moment he left the room.

As he passed out I heard him remark to Miss Davies:

"I expect Miss Saunders at my house before nightfall. I shall reserve some minutes between half-past five and six in which to introduce her to Mrs. Packard."



## 2. Questions

I knew all the current gossip about Mrs. Packard before I had parted with Miss Davies. Her story was a simple one. Bred in the West, she had come, immediately after her mother's death, to live with that mother's brother in Detroit. In doing this she had walked into a fortune. Her uncle was a rich man and when he died, which was about a year after her marriage with Mr. Packard and removal to C--, she found herself the recipient of an enormous legacy. She was therefore a woman of independent means, an advantage which, added to personal attractions of a high order, and manners at once dignified and winning, caused her to be universally regarded as a woman greatly to be envied by all who appreciated a well-founded popularity.

So much for public opinion. It differs materially from that just given me by her husband.

The mayor lived on Franklin Street in a quarter I had seldom visited. As I entered this once aristocratic thoroughfare from Carlton Avenue, I was struck as I had been before by its heterogeneous appearance. Houses of strictly modern type neighbored those of a former period, and it was not uncommon to see mansion and hovel confronting each other from the opposite side of the street. Should I find the number I sought attached to one of the crude, unmeaning dwellings I was constantly passing, or to one of mellower aspect and possibly historic association?

I own that I felt a decided curiosity on this point, and congratulated myself greatly when I had left behind me a peculiarly obnoxious monstrosity in stone, whose imposing proportions might reasonably commend themselves to the necessities, if not to the taste of the city's mayor.

A little shop, one story in height and old enough for its simple wooden walls to cry aloud for paint, stood out from the middle of a row of cheap brick houses. Directly opposite it were two conspicuous dwellings, neither of them new and one of them ancient as the street itself. They stood fairly close together, with an alley running between. From the number I had now reached it was evident that the mayor lived in one of these. Happily it was in the fresher and more inviting one. As I noted this, I paused in admiration of its spacious front and imposing doorway. The latter was in the best style of Colonial architecture, and though raised but one step from the walk, was so distinguished by the fan-tailed light overhead and the flanking casements glazed with antique glass, that I felt myself carried back to the days when such domiciles were few and denoted wealth the most solid, and hospitality the most generous.

A light wall, painted to match the house, extended without break to the adjoining building, a structure equal to the other in age and dimensions, but differing in all other respects as much as neglect and misuse could make it. Gray and forbidding, it towered in its place, a perfect foil to the attractive dwelling whose single step I now amounted with cheerful composure.

What should I have thought if at that moment I had been told that appearances were deceitful, and that there were many persons then living who, if left to their choice, would prefer life in the dismal walls from which I had instinctively turned, to a single night spent in the promising house I was so eager to enter.

An old serving-man, with a countenance which struck me pleasantly enough at the time, opened the door in response to my ring, only to make instant way for Mayor Packard, who advanced from some near-by room to greet me. By this thoughtful attention I was spared the embarrassment from which I might otherwise have suffered.

His few words of greeting set me entirely at my ease, and I was quite ready to follow him when a moment later he invited me to meet Mrs. Packard.

"I can not promise you just the reception you naturally look for," said he, as he led me around the stairs toward an opening at their rear, "but she's a kind woman and can not but be struck with your own kind spirit and quiet manner."

Happily, I was not called upon to answer, for at that moment the door swung open and he ushered me into a room flooded brilliantly with the last rays of the setting sun. The woman who sat in its glow made an instant and permanent impression upon me. No one could look intently upon her without feeling that here was a woman of individuality and power, overshadowed at present by the deepest melancholy. As she rose and faced us I decided instantly that her husband had not exaggerated her state of mind. Emotion of no ordinary nature disturbed the lines of her countenance and robbed her naturally fine figure of a goodly portion of its dignity and grace; and though she immediately controlled herself and assumed the imposing aspect of a highly trained woman, ready, if not eager, to welcome an intruding guest, I could not easily forget the drawn look about mouth and eyes which, in the first instant of our meeting, had distorted features naturally harmonious and beautifully serene.

I am sure her husband had observed it also, for his voice trembled slightly as he addressed her.

"I have brought you a companion, Olympia, one whose business and pleasure it will be to remain with you while I am making speeches a hundred miles away. Do you not see reason for thanking me?" This last question he pointed with a glance in my direction, which drew her attention and caused her to give me a kindly look.

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