

ON THE ROOF

A Story

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"We've time enough yet to take a look at the city from the top of the Securities Building. It's worth seeing, you know."

Prudence should have vetoed the suggestion. For the longer half of the blissful afternoon Viola had been aware that Raymond's eyes were saying more than they should, and that their mute eloquence was singularly sweet and satisfying. Considering the fact that she was as good as engaged to another man, discretion counseled flight. A voice within, an authoritative voice, cried out that at the best the day would soon be over, and urged her to make the most of it.

Viola compromised. "Mr. Raymond suggests our getting a view of the city from the top of one of the skyscrapers," she said, turning to her out-of-town guests. "If you are not too tired"—And her heart leaped at the prospect of their protests.

She walked beside Raymond silently, glad that he, too, seemed to have nothing to say. She was frightened to find herself clinging so fiercely to the joy of that afternoon together. He had come upon them quite by accident, but Viola knew that but for her he would have lifted his hat and gone his way. The gladness that leaped to her eyes at the sight of him, the tremor in her voice as she spoke his name, had been his undoing—and hers. They had lunched and taken a drive along the Boulevard, Viola's country cousins had had the time of their lives. And now the Western sky was red, and the time for saying good-by was near.

They stood looking down upon the city. Raymond, as in duty bound, pointed out the objects of interest. The country cousins hung upon his words, and declared that they would not have missed the sight for anything. As for Viola, she had no eyes for the crawling streets between the steep cliffs of brick and stone, nor for the crawling creatures far below. Brazenly, she feasted her eyes upon him.

He turned suddenly and looked into her eyes, and his own caught fire. A moment later they were standing together in an angle of the roof, sheltered from the view of their companions. The noise of the city below them seemed far away.

Raymond broke the spell by a downward gesture. "I wish it were all mine."

"You mean the whole town? What greediness!" she laughed.

"So that I could give it all to you."

"Thank you, but I'm not ambitious to be a plutocrat. Of course one must have the things one is used to. Poverty is the worst of all."

"Is it?" His eyes challenged hers.

"Oh, don't! You make it so hard for me."

"You make it hard for yourself—when you fight against your heart."

"Oh, you don't understand, Phil! It isn't as if I had only myself to think of."

"Do you ever give a thought to me?"

She put her hands over her ears in sudden tremor. If she listened longer she was lost. "I must go," she said hurriedly. "I've stayed longer than I should, but it was so pleasant." She turned in a panic and fled across the roof, and he followed slowly. When he overtook her, her eyes were dilated.

"They're gone!" she gasped.

"Who?"

"Why, Leonard and Bessie. What could have induced them to go without us?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. But they will be waiting for us below, without doubt."

He tried the door, rattled the knob sharply, and met questioning her gaze with a blank stare. "We're locked up here," he exclaimed. Then as Viola laughed hysterically he added, in haste: "Don't be frightened. It will be very easy to attract some one's attention."

Half an hour later, flushed and dripping with perspiration, as a result of his fruitless exertion, he acknowledged his mis-

take. "Your cousin must have had gone down before them. But get home, and we fall to make our chance, it will of course occur to us that we're still up here. And the thing to do is to resign ourselves to what patience we can muster."

She looked at him reproachfully, but did not meet her eyes. He sat some distance from her, staring moodily at the roof. Furtively, Viola put back her veil and smoothed her hair. Apparently her appearance was to him a matter of complete indifference. He never turned his eyes.

Her sense of resentment found voice at last. "Are you going to sit here in absolute silence? Haven't you anything to say?"

"I have plenty to say. But I can't say it without taking advantage of the situation."

A long silence. Then Raymond felt the slipping of a small hand down his sleeve. "I rather think, Phil," said a tremulous voice, "that I want you to take advantage of the situation."

Help was long in coming. As the darkness fell Viola drew closer, and her hand stole into his of its own accord.

It was a night without a star, and for that reason it was the more startling when suddenly a blinding illumination lit up the space where they sat. Viola shrieked and hid her face on her lover's shoulder.

"Only a searchlight, dearest. Rather startling, on this pitch-black night, wasn't it?"

Viola blushed in his arms. "Phil—do you suppose anybody—saw?"

The young man smiled. "Perhaps," he acknowledged. "In fact, little girl, I rather hope somebody did."

Fifteen or 20 minutes later the sound of approaching footsteps told them that release was at hand. Raymond shouted. There was a sound of a key turning in the lock. A grinning policeman and the watchman of the building confronted them. Explanations were exchanged. The elevator had stopped running at 6 o'clock, and the two young people descended the endless flights of stairs as blithely as if they were walking on air.

Viola's home was in an uproar. The story brought by the country cousins had aroused grave suspicions which Viola's mother explained as she clung to her daughter.

"It couldn't have happened at a more unfortunate time. To begin, with, Mr. Pickering was annoyed. He makes such a hobby of punctuality, you know. And then when Leonard and Bessie came in—"

She raised her head from Viola's shoulder and looked sharply at the young man who had escorted her daughter home. Raymond bore her scrutiny in silence. It was Viola who prompted her impatiently.

"Go on, mamma. When Leonard and Bessie came in—"

"It was, of course, entirely absurd," declared Viola's mother, persistently addressing herself to Raymond, "but one must make allowances for a lover's natural jealousy. When Leonard and Bessie said that you had been with them all afternoon, and that you and Viola had suddenly disappeared, the poor man jumped to the conclusion that you had—eloped."

There was an impressive silence which Viola improved by removing her hat.

"Of course, we must explain at once."

Viola's mother continued. "Would it be better for you to phone him, Viola, or will you send him a note? Perhaps you had better phone him and say you are sending the note. You see, it is important that the matter should be cleared up without delay."

"I don't know that it's worth while to make explanations, mamma," she said. "It is true I didn't have any intention of eloping, but just the same I'm going to marry Phil."