

THE REACTION

WHEREIN LOVE FUMBLES AND FINDS A WAY

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Illustrations by H. S. POTTER

IF THERE WAS ONLY something I could do," bitterly, "some way I could help."
"And are n't you doing just that now?"
He shook his head. "No, this does n't help much. It's a momentary diversion, perhaps—nothing more."

"But is n't that something—even a momentary diversion? After all, our lives are made up of moments, and if one can make some of them pleasant . . ."

"Ah, but this way the proportion's so small! If you would only let me—"

She smiled at him wistfully, "I thought we were not to talk of that?"

"I know," with frowning impatience. "But it's hard to stand by quietly and see you give to some one who does n't value it—what I—"

"No," she interrupted quickly. "You've no right to say that—that he does n't value it."

"Would his absence and silence imply that he does?"

"You're taking advantage of my confidence! I should n't have told you. I knew that at the time, and yet I had to tell some one—and there's no one else I can trust."

"But you can't expect me always to keep silent—you ask too much."

The waiter came up now, cleared the table and brought their coffee.

He glanced at his watch. "Come, change your mind about the theater! Let me take you somewhere. It's only a quarter of eight; we still have time."

She shook her head.

"How about a concert? We need n't stay it through."

"No, I'd rather go home."

"To be there in case he should telephone," harshly.

She flushed hotly and half rose from her chair.

"Ah, I only hurt you!" hopelessly. "I can't help it somehow. You're right—I'd better take you home."

"But not in that spirit;" the flush had passed now. "I'm not going to let any bitterness come between us. It's purely selfish on my part—I need your friendship too much," with a little catch in her voice.

The street seemed chill and bleak after the brilliantly lighted, overheated restaurant. He motioned for a cab.

"NO, let's walk, at least part of the way. It always helps me to walk—more than anything else. If we can walk until I'm physically exhausted, I may sleep tonight. I have n't," her voice quivered, "not for many nights."

He pressed the hand that lay lightly on his arm. "Poor little girl."

"Ah, don't pity me! And yet," musingly, "I suppose that's what I want—pity, or at least sympathy, or I should n't have told you. And I used to think I was strong, proud and independent!"

They were soon at the entrance of her apartment hotel.

"Let me go up for a little while, Katherine. I don't like to think of you, spending the long evening alone in this mood."

He had not realized how very pale and wan she looked, until she laid aside her hat and leaned back in a big chair by the stand light.

Katherine read his thoughts, for she smiled and pushed the light a little away from her.

"Don't you want to read to me?" she asked after a while. "That will be easier than to talk."

He took up a magazine and turned through it carelessly.

"An article on 'City Parks'?"

She shook her head.

"How Micky Lied the Boss; A Story of East Side Politics." Would you care for that?"

"Oh, no—no!"

"Are n't you a little difficult? 'The Sub-structure,' a short story by Edith Twine Westcott."

"You might try that."

He smiled, "I thought so," and drawing a chair nearer the light, he began the story.

A sharp ring came from the telephone. Katherine started violently, with a little inarticulate cry. As she ran across the room, he caught a glimpse of her face, transfigured with joy and expectancy.

"Hello—hello!" quiveringly.

"Oh, Mrs. Bishop!" and the words were like a heart-sick wail.

"Tomorrow for luncheon? I'm afraid I can't. I'm not at all well—have a very bad cold. Don't think I can go out for several days."

"Is she? Oh, that will make it very nice!"

"Yes."

"Yes, I will. Good-bye."

She came back to her chair with a face so white that he was frightened, but he made no comment. He went on with the story, although he knew as she leaned back with closed eyes that she heard



Katherine's tense breathing was the only sound in the moment's wait

no word of it. Nor did he himself know what he read. He was thinking how many times a day that pitiful little tragedy must be enacted. How every time the telephone rang, she would rush to it with her heart in her throat—only to meet with sickening disappointment.

STILL he read on. It was easier to read than not, just then. Suddenly she leaned forward, her hand on his arm, her eyes dark with excitement.

"Will you do something for me?"

He laid down the magazine.

"Will you telephone to his hotel—now? Just to see if he's in town—I don't even know that."

It was several moments before he answered. He was looking down at the magazine, slowly tearing off a strip of margin.

"Are you sure you want me to do that, Katherine?"

"Yes—yes, he will never know! The telephone girl at the hotel knows my voice; but she does n't know yours."

There was another silence. She watched him tensely, as he tore off another strip of margin.

"I'll do this, Katherine, if you really wish it. But—"

"You would rather not?"

"For your sake, I would rather not. I can't bear to think of your resorting to any little subterfuge to hear from him. Can't you realize, Katherine, that if he loves you, he will come to you? And if he does n't love you—do you want him to come?"

"Oh, I know—I know! It's undignified—unwomanly even! I should n't have asked you. But I'm almost desperate; I feel I can't bear it much longer."

His only answer was to cover the hand that still lay on his arm. He took up the magazine again. Even as he read, he could see her lying back pale and listless. He finished the story and put it down.

She looked up and smiled. "It was very nice of you to read to me."

He made an impatient gesture. Then he rose.

"I think I'll go now, Katherine. It seems so useless to stay. I'm so powerless to do anything that can help."

"Ah, don't say that! You have helped—a great deal."

He shook his head, picked up his hat and cane, and held out his hand.

"I'll call you up tomorrow. I'd like to hear from you every day for a while now. And if there's anything I can do—"

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"You will never be alone again"