

The Temptation and the Crisis

BY MARY CAROLYN DAVIES.
"SO YOU'RE leaving tonight, Waring?" called out one of the men, as Don sauntered over to the group.

"The boat sails at midnight," he answered quietly.
 "How long shall you be abroad?" continued Keith Hartley carelessly. The women in the group turned to hear Waring's reply. The orchestra began the waltz, a slow dream movement.

"I probably shan't come back," explained Waring courteously. "My relatives are in England, you know. This is our dance, I think." He turned to Keith's wife. She rose. They moved out together past the circle and glided out on the floor to the insistent tones of the waltz.

The blaze of lights, the lure of the mocking waltz, and the nearness to him, were too much for Clarice's self-control.

"Take me back to the others, Don," she said, speaking very slowly to keep her voice under control. I can't stand it."

His face was white, but he managed to keep his tones even. "If you really want me to, Clarice," he said. "But I must see you, I must!" he cried out suddenly. The vehemence in his tone startled her. "I have to leave in half an hour. The boat sails at midnight. Clarice, do you realize it?" His voice was pleading, insistent, vibrant with pain. Then he added, more quietly, "I must see you alone for a moment."

"Shall we sit out this dance, then?" she asked lightly, smiling gaily as they passed someone they knew. "Take me to the conservatory, Don," she finished, in a low tone, "we can talk there."

The half-soothing, half-mocking rhythm of the waltz followed them as they slipped away. She sank in a little white heap on a bench behind the palms and flowers, and Don seated himself beside her.

They could see the flash of the white dresses in the room beyond, and the bits of laughter and gaiety that floated in to them seemed very far away.

There was a moment's silence. Now that this had come, Clarice tried madly to put it off. In desperation she strove to think of some trivial thing to speak of, anything, anything to gain time. But only the one thought kept feverishly beating into her mind, and, try as she would to keep it from her lips, she found herself saying: "So you're leaving, Don?" She tried to make her tone careless, noncommittal, but she knew that he understood what lay beneath the little tremble in it.

Don stared fixedly away from her. His voice was tense.

"You know why I'm going, Clarice," he said.

Clarice looked at his averted face, and blushed painfully. "It's not because of me?" she ventured lamely.

"Oh, no, it's not because of you," he flung out bitterly, and the irony in his voice seemed to make him suddenly older.

She listened helplessly, with a hurt look in her eyes.

Suddenly he smiled over at her, with all his old boyish mischief, that had been one of the things about him that attracted her most. He held up his left hand, and with the other hand elaborately laid the fingers, one by one, over each other. He held it up to her, "fingers crossed." "No," he repeated teasingly, "it isn't at all on your account."

In spite of the trouble in her face, Clarice smiled back at him, abandonedly.

But all the fun died out of his face, presently, and only the pain remained.

"Clarice," he said gently, "we can't let things be this way. I can't live my life without you, and—" he added reverently, "you love me, too." It was partly a question, partly a triumphant assertion, but mostly an appeal. "You know it, Clarice," he went on more gently. "You've known it ever since—that night."

"Yes," breathed the girl, so low that he bent his head to her, "I've known—ever since that night."

His eagerness stopped her. "Then, why not—" he began. "O, Clarice, come with me. We'll never be happy otherwise." He scowled heavily at the floor, but did not seem to find any answer to the problem.

Presently he went on. "I made up my mind, when I saw how I had got to care, that I would go away for good. And no one would be hurt but I." She drew a sharp little breath, and he went on. "But when I found out that you cared, too—"

His voice broke. There was a

breathless silence. The girl was breathing quickly, her face half turned away from him.

"Clarice, come to me," he urged once more, and reached out his arms to her.

With a little sob she turned toward him. "I mustn't. I will not!" she cried, but let him draw her closer.

The music had stopped. The dancers were coming toward them. But almost before they realized that the dance was over, the next was beginning.

"Second extra!" called a voice, and Waring rose.

"I must go," he said. "Where shall I take you till this dance is over? After the second extra I will meet you at the door. I will have a cab ready, and we will be gone and reach the steamer before anyone suspects."

"I will go to the dressing-room and get my wraps on," she said dully.

"After the second extra I will come," he said, and was gone.

She stumbled into the dressing-room, but stopped short as she heard a sound of sobbing. On the couch in the corner lay the maid, crying pitifully.

"Why, what is it?" asked Clarice. Even in her own trouble she could not pass by a creature like this.

The girl raised a startled face. "I thought every one was gone," she breathed. "It isn't anything, Miss, and sobs choked her voice again.

"Tell me, perhaps I can help." She smoothed out the crumpled note the girl held out to her, and read it. It was an appeal for the girl to go West with someone who signed himself "Jack," and "get rid of it all." Clarice went white.

"And me with two children," said the maid. "My husband drinks. It's not the first time he's wanted me to do it—and I'm too tired to fight any more."

"Think what it means!" cried Clarice sternly. "Honor and—"

"Don't you think I've thought about it all?" Her voice was fierce and challenging. "But he—he—"

"I know," breathed the other girl. "I leave it to you," said the maid abruptly. "Would you stick it out if you were me? Would you stick it out?"

Clarice drew a long breath, her head went up, and her hand caught the other girl's firmly.

"I'd stick it out," she said. "The last crash of the music trembled and was still.

Clarice opened the door and stepped out into the room. As Waring sprang to meet her, she looked at her programme.

"The next dance is my husband's," she said calmly. "He will be looking for me. Since you are leaving now, we had better say 'goodbye.'" She put her hand cordially in his, and looked him bravely in the eyes.

"Goodbye," he said, with his face white and worn.

The music crashed out welcomingly. Hartley was waiting for his wife.

"Goodbye," said Don again. "Don't let me spoil your dance," and with his hand on the door he watched her glide off with Hartley.

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