

A QUESTION OF OPPORTUNITY

by Beth Slater Whitson

"It is certainly the biggest song hit of the season."

"Yes, and one that is going to have longer run than the average product."

Bettie, seated directly behind the two speakers, dropped the evening paper and leaned slightly forward, interest depicted in every feature of her dainty face. Bettie's face was like a small white flower, her gray eyes and brown hair accentuating a whiteness that was only relieved by her lips' soft rosininess.

"Queer about these big song sensations anyhow," said the man who had first spoken. "They are nearly without exception a first effort of an unknown writer." "Another queer thing," interrupted the other man. "is that the unknown writer remains unknown, so far as the monetary part of the transaction is concerned. I have it on good authority that the unknown element in question received - the munificent sum of twenty-five - dollars, while the other two are drawing royalties that would make a hundred-dollar-a-month job ashamed of itself."

"You say the other two, how about there being more than two interested? There are only that number of parts to a song, are there not?"

Bettie's eyes were unusually big and bright, and a hurt look was beginning to show in them as she listened.

"Ordinarily there are only that many parts to such a composition, but in this case there were two part and three parties. It was like this, the composer got hold of the lyric from some little country girl way down South, or West---somewhere in the hills, I think—anyway, one who did not know the value of her own work.

Both turned quickly. Something like a protest had escaped Bettie's lips, but her gaze was on the great, gloomy buildings that flashed past the hurrying suburban car. The two front-seat.

Passengers turned toward her inquiringly, then resumed their conversation.

"As I was going to tell you," said the man whom Bettie had momentarily interrupted, "about the time the music was completed the traveling manager of the firm that is handling this song happened along, and, being a pretty close friend of the composer, was shown the score. A few hours later the girl was written that the manager of a certain big firm had seen the manuscript and been very favorably impressed with it. He, however, desired to make a few changes in the lyric, for which service he would expect to share the credit of the authorship. He was reasonably sure, after the necessary changes were made, of its acceptance by his house.

"Naturally, the girl accepted the offer?"

"Yes. A few days later, however, she was notified that the house was not anxious to publish on any terms."

"By the manager, or the house?"

"By the manager. He wrote her that he was very sorry that he had overestimated the thing. His firm showed very little interest but by dint of much persuasion he had succeeding in wringing a promise from them to bring it out."

"I don't quite understand why the manager so deeply interested."

"Don't? Well, you didn't let me finish: There was a proviso; the house would only agree to publish on the sole condition that the girl turned over her entire rights, for which she would receive the amount of twenty-five dollars."

"I still do not see where the manager comes in, outside of sharing the credit of a thing that was supposed to be worthless."

"You can't?" smiled the other. "Well, he didn't suppose it to be worthless, and he simply came in on the girl's rightful share of the royalties. He used the firm for a cat's paw and bought her out himself, that's all."

The other man whistled softly. "I see," he said. "By the way, who is the traveling manager for this house, and what are his duties?"

"My knowledge of such work is somewhat limited, but I think he introduces the new stuff. Demonstrates in all the big places of the city. In brief, he goes around the country, singing and plugging; that is the way I understand it. The man in this particular happens to be Justin Macfarlane."

"Justin Macfarlane!" echoed the other incredulously. "I didn't think a squarer fellow lived. Are you quite sure about your dates?"

"Perfectly sure, old fellow, and I never said he was not square."

"Maybe you didn't, but a man who would do that would"—

"Hold on. Nine men out of ten would probably have done the same thing had the opportunity been theirs." "I must confess," he went on hurriedly, "that I thought badly of him at first, but when I tried putting myself in his place I simply withheld my judgment; Frankly, I never met a man I liked better."

"Neither did I. He certainly took advantage of the situation. I rather wonder at a girl having the intelligence to write a thing of that sort being' so credulous. Her faith in humanity must have been greater than the average."

"I think not. Every mother's daughter and son of us, I believe, are born with enough faith to balance the scales in its favor; and it is a black day for the majority of us when the other side begins to pull downward. I fancy the foundations of this girl's belief would be pretty rudely shaken if she knew."

The bell had rung, and the slight figure behind them was standing up adjusting her long, gray coat. Just as the car slowed down she leaned forward and touched the speaker lightly on the shoulder. She knows now, thanks to you," she said sweetly and distinctly, and before the men could recover from their amazement the car had started again and the little figure was lost in the crowd of the street.

As Bettie came down the broad old stairway, the small hand slipping along the rail was still trembling as evidence of the fierce storm that had been raging in her breast and was as yet unspent, Her black evening gown only intensified the pale sweetness of her face, on which pain had left a few telling marks.

When she had gone up those steps for the first time three months before she was only a girl. She had endured hardship, and had met discouragement, but she had been brave. and had battled on as if she were winning every fight. She had known the burden of a great responsibility from childhood and yet she was a girl for all that. Toil had but sweetened her, and she had been strong, with a great, unshaken faith in humanity. But her little fortress of belief had without warning, tumbled down about her within the last few hours. It was now a woman's sorrowful heart she carried down the long flight of dusky, polished steps this evening.

Justin Macfarlane, waiting on the hearthrug in the room at the foot of the stairway, watched the door expectantly. There was something peculiarly winning about his face. That it was honest and clean would have been the verdict of most people. There was strength in it, too, and generations of good blood were manifested in the lithe athletic figure.

He turned quickly as Bettie entered the room, pleasure lighting every feature. Some words of greeting were on his lips, but the full light falling on Bettie's face revealed its utter hopelessness, and without a word he held out his arms, Bettie hesitated, but only for an instant, then went to them dumbly, pressing her face closely against the roughness of his coat, a little tremor shaking her from head to foot.

"You are ill, Bettie," and the man's voice was sharp with anxiety; "even your lips are trembling."

He kissed them once, then would have kissed her again, but she crouched against him with a little cry, so acute, so poignant, he could almost feel the agony of it himself. "No—No—I am not," she said; "wait—I can't tell—you—yet."

The man lifted one small hand and pressed the slim fingers against his face. Something kept him silent, he knew not what, but some divining instinct sent the message of pain to his heart before the girl spoke again.

"Let me go, Justin," she said at last. She spoke very low, but her voice had regained its accustomed clearness.

"The man's arms slowly released her. Bewilderment and pain were struggling in his face, and the girl's face was no more tranquil than his own as she stood before him.

"Listen," she locked her slight fingers and met his inquiring gaze sadly, "it's hard, what I am going to say, very hard, but I must say it. I wanted to go away without telling you—without hurting you—but I can't; you must know why I'm going."

"Going away," repeated the man, as if he doubted hearing straight.

"Yes, going home. I'm leaving tonight. You'll know when I'm through," said Bettie, wearily. "I only knew—today."

Justin leaned forward as if he would force the unwilling words from the girl's lips. "Go on!" he cried.

"I only knew today," repeated Bettie slowly. "Coming in this afternoon on the car, I overheard two men discussing your new song."

"Well?"

"And I learned something about it that had not known before."

"Yes?" said the man.

"I—I—learned—that for it you, you became a liar—and a thief!

"Bettie!" cried the man, his face blank with astonishment.

"They are not very pretty words," went on the girl monotonously, "but, unforgivingly, there are no substitutes."

"In God's name, Bettie!" burst from the man's lips, "tell me what you mean!"

"What I mean," returned the girl, pitilessly, "is just what I have said. You are a thief. I heard the whole story today of your dishonesty. You made the poor, little country fool believe there was nothing in song that everyone is singing today. You became her benefactor, and persuaded the firm to handle it, even though it had no merit: and now you are drawing her share of the royalties month after month, while you call yourself a man—"

"Bettie!" protested the man imploringly.

"You were not satisfied," continued the same low voice relentlessly, "to share with her the authorship of a lyric of which you never changed one line."

"You judge harshly, Bettie. Let me explain."

"There is no explanation to make," she returned quickly; "you can't deny having done this?"

"No—I cannot." said the man unsteadily; "I'll deny nothing. I am even blacker than you have drawn me. But I never t h o u g h t —"

"You never thought!" echoed the girl. "You never thought there was a possibility of this girl being able to make use of what you have taken; you never thought that perhaps the hope of a lifetime depended on this one throw: that she might be desperately poor, destitute, and would catch at your pittance as a drowning man at a straw, to relieve the moment's strain. You only thought of yourself, and the added luxuries it would bring you, you who already had so much!"

The man's face was drawn as if from physical suffering. "You are right!" he cried. "I never thought at all. I simply took advantage of the situation without thinking what it might mean to anyone but myself. I never once pictured the writer—to me it was simply an opportunity. It never occurred to me under what circumstances it might have been written. I have only seen the bright side of life; I refused to see the other. Of course, you are merely surmising whatever the conditions may have been. But whatever they were does not lessen the magnitude my offence as I see it through your eyes."

Justin had risen, and stood facing the girl who accused him. Now he leaned forward and caught her resisting hands. "I am not trying to defend myself," he pleaded. "I never realized until now how inhuman I was or that I was in reality what you have so frankly called me—a liar and a thief. But I will atone, dear, if you will only not look at me in that way."

The girl only stared at the other's white face.

"You won't let it come between us?" he begged. "I can see very clearly how contemptible I must appear in your sight, and I am glad you have shown me myself as I really am; but you mustn't leave me. If you break your promise, it will be all up with me. I love you, Bettie," he said brokenly, "I love you."

"I couldn't respect you," whispered the girl sadly, "a man who had lied and stolen."

"I admit I have done both," said Justin huskily, "all you say and more, but I can right the wrong—I will make restitution."

"Every penny that you have taken?" cried the girl, her face suddenly sweet with the old tenderness:

"Every penny," answered the man, "and more. I can help in other ways. She will write more lyrics and I can help her to place them; and I will, I swear I will," he finished eagerly.

"Perhaps she doesn't need you now." Bettie's voice was strangely wistful.

"I shall make myself needed—and you—you will try to forgive after a while, won't you, Bettie?"

It was a strong appeal, and Bettie's heart ached to forgive that minute, but she refused to listen.

"I will try," she said simply, "but I'm going home now—going tonight. It will be much better that we are apart for a while." Bettie's eyes were sorrowful, but tearless, as they met his. "I trusted you," she said, "I trusted you more than you know."

In Justin Macfarlane's face the light of a sudden resolve shone. "Bettie, I shall be as you say," he said gently. "I shall not even try to persuade you to stay, but when I have amends so far as lies in my power, your will come to me once more, or let me come to you and try to win my old place back in your heart again?"

The girl's lips quivered a soft assent: then, "You must go now," she whispered.

"Not until you tell me where you are going," cried Macfarlane. "You forget that you have never told me anything of yourself that I have never asked. I do not even know where the greater part of your life has been spent."

The girl's face crimsoned warmly. "And I cannot tell you even now; you must trust me, or—"

"I do, but how shall I be able to let you know when I have done what I promise to do?"

"I shall know," she said quickly. "I shall know when you have kept your promise, and will come to you then—not before."

"You make it very hard—harder than you think, dear."

"Not so hard as you have made it for me" flashed the girl, but her eyes were wet.

"I know—O Bettie, I know!" groaned the man, "and it will take months to replace what I have drawn and wasted, but you will wait—you will not forget?"

With a swift movement Bettie released her hands and taking his face between them, drew it down to her own. "I shall not forget," she repeated gently. "I am trusting you to be finer when I see you again."

"Amen," said the man fervently. "Infinitely finer," whispered Bettie. "Now go, dear." The last word had been scarcely more than a breath, but the man's face was suddenly radiant, and without a word he went.

A letter lay on the desk of the man who many months before had sworn to make full amends for a lapse of honor had been even harder than he expected. To all of his inquiries the girl had been unaccountably reticent concerning her work. She had refused every offer of help graciously, but firmly, and in answer to his full letter of confession, he received a brief note whose kindness stung him deeply. Every penny that had ever come to him through the song that had been a source of such bitter pain, had been forwarded to her and duly receipted. He had kept his promise, to the letter, and restored all he had taken wrongfully.

And through all these weeks and months no word had come from Bettie. But he had grown finer, as she had said he would.

He picked up the little note with an air of weariness, but a look of interest crept into his eyes as he read. She, the girl who had been the unconscious cause of his downfall, was in the city, and was coming to see him at ten-thirty. And, glancing at his watch, Macfarlane saw it lacked only a few moments of that time.

Even as he refolded the letter the door opened and closed, and someone stood there with a look of gladness on her face.

"Bettie!" cried the man, "O Bettie! you came just when I had earned you!"

"And just when you had heard from Elizabeth-Durand-Page," smiled Bettie.

"Yes," said Justin, "I am expecting her now, but how could you—know?"

Bettie's soft arms made a yoke about the man's willing shoulders as he kissed her. "I know—because"—Bettie's words came haltingly between kisses—"I know because—I—am—she!"

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