



ELEVENTH INSTALLMENT

Tony was standing. "Why," he grated, "must you always bring Jane into it, at a time like this? Why can't you let us be us? And if you, don't care for me, how can you kiss me," his voice broke, "as you've just been kissing me? How, in all decency and fairness?"

Ellen answered. And it would have taken a man far cleverer than the badgered, heart-hungry boy, to know that she was answering the first part of his speech—rather than the last!

"Because," said Ellen, "I'm a fool! That's why!"

Tony was laughing, and in his laughter was hurt pride and injured dignity and a black and blue soul bruise.

"Well," he said, "since you think you're a fool so soon, perhaps I'd better go away from here. I don't doubt that as long as you don't care a hang, Jane would be glad to see me. I've always talked things out with Jane. She understands me!"

The old, old come-back. She understands me! Ellen, hearing it for the first time, flinched under it, even though she had perpetrated it. "If he loved me," she said to herself, "he couldn't go. It wouldn't be possible for him to leave me. I was right—if he could go, tonight, to see another woman, why then—"

Poor little Ellen. She was right about herself!—She was a fool. Being one, she said—

"I'm sure Jane understands you. By all means go to see her." "I suppose," he said, "that as soon as I'm gone, you'll phone for Alven. I have no doubt that he understands you as well as Jane understands me."

Ellen was blinking to keep back the tears.

"Dick always leaves his receiver off, in the evening," she said. He likes to work at night—he doesn't like interruptions. I couldn't reach him by phone," she finished. "That ought to be a comfort to you!"

"So it is," said Tony. He had his hat in his hand. He was fussing with the brim of it.

"So it is," said Tony again. He too was blinking.

Ellen was speaking. Out of turn again, but she couldn't help it. Mother or no, she couldn't help it.

"Tony," she said, "believe this. You mustn't think that I phone to men—that I have them come up here, alone with me at night. Dick stayed just once, after a little party. He stayed to talk about work. Then he asked me to marry him—that was the time. But I sent him right home. I—I've never had any of these sessions, Tony, like last night, and this evening. Except with you. I haven't lived in the city very long. Only three years. I'm—I'm not used to the racket. I suppose. But I've always wanted to keep myself, Tony . . . for—" she paused. But up over her white little face a heavy flush came creeping.

Tony, fascinated, watched that flush. He saw it cover her chin, redden her very ear lobes.

"Keep yourself," he echoed rather stupidly, "keep yourself—for what, Ellen?"

Ellen's whole heart was reaching out, her hands were reaching out. She couldn't help it.

This was love. This desire to give and give and give . . .

"To keep myself for my husband, Tony," she answered.

The boy was laying down his hat. He wasn't blinking, any more, but he moistened his lips with his tongue, as if they were dry, before he spoke.

"You don't want me to leave, do

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ou?" he said, and he was whispering, too. You would feel badly if I went to Jane, now.

Ellen was retreating, somehow, before his advance—for Tony was advancing. But she had crossed, for the moment at least, her Rubicon.

"Yes, I would mind," she said. "Just as much as you'd mind if you knew that I were going to stay here, with Dick!"

She was back against the wall, now. But her eyes were lost in Tony's gaze. They were bluer than ever, Tony's eyes. Perhaps because they were wet.

"Darling," said Tony huskily, "you do love me!"

Ellen tried to deny it. To say that she didn't love him. She tried to, but the words stuck in her throat. With her eyes lost in his gaze, with the lovely color staining her childish throat, she nodded. Mutely, but vehemently.

She was held tightly in Tony's arms—so tightly that it hurt, that it left her breathless. Or was it the pounding of her heart that made breathing so difficult?

"Darling," Tony was saying, and his voiced seemed to come from ever so far away, "I love you. You're my wife."

Automatically Ellen felt of her wedding ring with the thumb of her left hand.

"You're my wife!" Tony was saying. But she couldn't answer now, not the way the walls of the room were closing in, not the way the lights were dancing.

And then the lights had ceased to dance. For Tony's hand, feeling along the wall, had found the electric switch, and the world was all darkness—a sweet, warm, throbbing darkness.

Sanity always comes with the morning. Oh, sometimes it would be better, far better, if it didn't! Life can't just be left to slide along by daylight. Sanity brought Ellen back to earth with a thud. Her

eyes were sober as she surveyed Tony, across her little breakfast table.

Tony wasn't sober. Tony wasn't sane. His eyes had a deep warm glow that lay back of them. No, Tony wasn't sober, that was why Ellen found it so hard to say what he felt she must.

For Ellen, this morning, had many things to say. Ellen had waked this morning a woman, and all of the parts that are woman's heritage lay in her heart.

Always, to almost every bride, comes a moment of terror. A moment when, looking at her new husband, she asks an age-old question.

"Will it always be like this?" she asks. Even though she knows, in her soul, that no fire can burn at fever heat eternally.

"Oh God," she prays, "let it be like this forever." Even though she knows that even God can not put her stamp of forever on earthly things!

Ellen was asking the same question that every bride asks, was saying the same prayer. But in her case, it wasn't a question—and it wasn't a prayer. It was a cruel fact that she was telling herself, and telling God, too.

"This won't last," she was saying in her soul. "It can't last. Oh, I won't let it hurt me—it mustn't kill me—when it's all over."

Tony was speaking. "I've got to go to the office this morning," he said, "for just a little while. I bet, honey, you're surprised. I bet you didn't have any idea I really worked! And then we'll take the car and start off somewhere, for a honeymoon. We'll just go—we'll not plan where. We'll start for the place where the blue begins. We may end up a couple of other places. But it doesn't matter—as long as we're together!"

Ellen gulped down some coffee. "Tony," she said, "I—I hate to throw cold water on your plans, but I think it might be better if we put off the honeymoon for a little while . . ."

"But why?" he questioned. "We, of all married folks, need a honeymoon. To get acquainted—"

All at once he was out of his chair, was on Ellen's side of the improvised breakfast table, was on the arm of her chair.

"I didn't know," he said, "that being married was so-so swell. I didn't know that love could be like this!"

His head ducked down, was snuggled into the curve of Ellen's throat.

He was kissing the place where a pulse throbbed crazily.

"Don't Tony," she said almost sharply. "Please don't. That's over."

Tony's arm tightened. His voice came in a muffled fashion, because his lips were against her throat.

"You mean that kissing's over?" he questioned, "the first day after we're married?"

Ellen tried to make the tone of her voice seem hard. It was time to make herself clear, at last. Her whole life might depend upon the stand she took—her every chance at happiness! She should love lightly.

"I told you," she said, "night before last when we met at the dance, that marriage to me was just marriage! That I wasn't in love with you, not in the way you mean."

"How," Tony questioned, "how about last night?"

"Last night," answered Ellen, "was hysteria. It wasn't love."

Slowly Tony was rising from the arm of Ellen's chair. He walked the length of Ellen's prim little room—and stood looking down from her window, to the crowded street below.

"I guess you're right," he said, "about there being no honeymoon for us. I guess you're right about the whole thing. Only I'll go a trifle farther than you've gone. Seems to me we don't belong together, at all, in a married sense, until you feel differently. It wouldn't be right, somehow, to go on living together. Not if you actually—and I believe the thought has penetrated into my brain, at last—don't love me!"

Ellen's hand, flung out, knocked over a coffee cup. She hadn't expected Tony to go a step farther than she had gone.

Tony continued in a dull monotone.

"I'll go back to live at the club," he said. "You can stay here—you can have all the money you want, of course—but we won't go hunting for an apartment. You've been right, I suppose, all the time—about not letting it get you. Well, it won't get me, either. I'll see you, but it won't be as if we're man and wife—I guess it's my turn to make terms! I won't try to hold you—you're the one, from now on, who much make the advances. But remember this. I don't want a bought-and-paid-for wife, not now. I don't really want half-portion love, any more. Something happened to me. I want love to be—" he choked, he turned back again to the window, "as real," he finished, "as it seemed, last night."

Ellen put the cup, right side up, on the table. "You're the head of

the family," she said slowly. "I suppose it's up to you. Have it your own way. Only I'll take none of your money . . ."

Tony reached for his hat, as he had reached the last evening. Only this time he didn't hesitate in the doorway—this time Ellen didn't call him back.

"You're stepping out of character," he said shortly. "Well, see you soon," he called, as he clattered down the stairs. He might have been just anybody going out—just anybody at all!

Ellen called out the conventional reply. There might have been no sapphire hoop upon her finger.

"That will be nice!" she answered. And then she went back into the room and cleared off the table. It wasn't until she made the daybed, until, in a certain pillow, she saw a round dent that might have been made by a head, that she broke down.

"Oh, Tony, I love you!" she sobbed. "Oh, Tony, I want you! I want to be married to you—I want to be your wife. Come back to me!"

But Tony didn't come back. He was on his way to some office where he worked.

Ellen expected to feel shy when she met Tony for the first time, after he had left her room, but she didn't have the opportunity at once to feel shy. For the first two days of the first week, she stayed at home waiting, expecting him momentarily

to return. Flinching at the sound of every footstep on the stairs—shivering as she lay in bed, wide-eyed and sleepless. Not being wise enough to know that Tony was himself waiting wistfully, eagerly for a sign from her. But after the first two days she didn't stay home any more. Pride can be like that. She went out to luncheon with Gay, and talked blandly of the double standard.

It was after she had been married for two weeks—after she'd lived through two aching weeks of not seeing Tony—that she met Sandy on the avenue one afternoon as she was going home. Sandy's attitude toward her was carefully veiled. Ellen could see that her marriage to a millionaire had given her an added importance in his eyes.

"Mind, Mrs. Brander," he asked, "if I walk along with you for a couple of blocks?"

Ellen laughed. "A couple of blocks, at least, Sandy," she said. "For I'm not in a hurry to get anywhere."

Sandy's eyebrows were raised. "The poppa got a night out?" he questioned. And added, "So soon?" Ellen tossed her head.

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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