



FOURTEENTH INSTALLMENT

"Hello, Ellen," said Margie, and there was more warmth in her voice than there had been in Jane's.

"Say, I'm glad you brought your boy friend. He's amusing—the one with the whiskers, I mean."

Ellen laughed. She didn't dislike Margie.

"He thinks you're amusing, too," she said. "He's mad to paint you."

"Nude?" asked Margie. Her voice had a slightly rising note. "Isn't that the way artists usually paint their women?"

Ellen felt her color rising, but she answered levelly.

"Some do," she answered, "but not Sandy. He's a fashion man primarily, although he does stunning illustrations."

"Oh," said Margie. That was all. The other girls were bending forward, frosted glasses in hand, cigarettes held before carefully rouged lips. One of them, a dark young person, spoke languidly.

"You're the first model I ever met," she said. "Do you pose for the figure?"

Again Ellen answered as casually as she could.

"Only for my mother, years ago—"

she told the dark girl. "She was an artist, you see. She was rather an important artist. You probably wouldn't know . . . I'm afraid that even if I wanted to pose in the altogether I couldn't compete with some of the models who go in for figure work. My own figure—"

she laughed, apologetically and smoothed the dark silk that shrouded her knees.

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Manager

HOTEL

CONTINENTAL

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"Gosh almighty!" said Tony. Just that.

And—

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Tony's hands were holding hers so tightly that her wedding ring bit into the two fingers next to it.

"Have they been giving you a buggy ride?" he asked Ellen. "I heard that they looked you over before dinner. Margie told me."

"They tried to," Ellen told him, "but I can take care of myself."

"Sometimes," said Tony, "I wish you couldn't!"

"What was the idea, anyway?" Ellen wanted to know. "This party, I mean. If it hadn't been for Sandy, and for the way he precipitated me into it, it would have all the earmarks of being an announcement for you and Jane of something or other. I feel like a guilty secret."

"You may be guilty," said Tony, "but you're no secret—not any more. To tell you the truth, Ellen, I admitted, 'I don't quite get the hang of this thing, myself. Believe it or not—when the party came up that night, it was just sheer devilishness on Jane's part. I realized it at the time; it took me off my feet for a moment. She'd said nothing about any party to me, before. She just said it to get your goat. I'm not even sure it's her birthday, tonight—I never can remember dates. I wouldn't have told you this if Sandy hadn't made her come through in a big way. When he did I was tickled to death. It gave me a chance to be with you again. I told a dozen lies—white ones—about how my friends would feel—and yours—"

So that was that! Ellen all along had suspected, from Tony's bewilderment on the night of the impromptu meetings, that there had been something odd in back of the birthday party arrangements.

"I don't get Jane," she said finally. "What's she playing for, Tony? Not that it's very sane to ask—I know what she's playing for. It's you."

There was a seriousness back of Tony's casual sounding speech.

"Jane and I," he said, "knocked around together for years. I suppose she'd gotten to sort of taking me for granted. . . . After all, we weren't responsible when we met, you and I. We shook all of the world's plans into a cocked hat."

Ellen spoke resentfully.

"That," she said "makes me feel like a spare tire. If you want an annulment any time, you and Jane—"

"You'd drop me as easily as that?" said Tony. "You mean it?"

Ellen wanted to say that she didn't mean it; that she wouldn't give him up, not for fifty years. But instead she made her mouth into a straight line and lowered her lashes so that Tony couldn't look into her eyes.

"I'd let you go as easily as I'd let go of this—" she told him. She opened her fingers and the huge chiffon handkerchief that she was carrying fluttered, like a dead butterfly, to the conservatory floor. "I'd—"

"Yes, you would!" said Tony gruffly. All at once he had gathered her so tightly into his arms that her body felt bruised against the hardness of his body. "I'm sick and tired of this stuff," said Tony. "It's time for a showdown. We're not fencing, you and I. We're married. It's time we behaved like human beings, or—"

He stopped. For there was a rustle of skirts (skirts do rustle, this year) and a voice spoke.

"Oh—but I'm intruding!" said a voice. "It always seems as if I choose the wrong time for my entrances, doesn't it?"

Of course, it was Jane—it couldn't be anybody else. She stood in the doorway of the conservatory—the light was behind her. They couldn't see the outline of her face—the expression of her eyes and mouth—but somehow Tony's arms had loosened, somehow Ellen was wriggling free of them.

"You don't know," said Jane, "how silly I feel!"

Tony don't say anything at all—perhaps it was because he couldn't trust his voice. Ellen didn't say anything either, for a moment, and then—

"It's quite all right," she said, "we were just rehearsing our big scene."

Jane took a step into the conservatory.

"It seems to me," she said at last, and levelly, "that it's always a big scene, that it's always a rehearsal. You and Tony aren't married, really—"

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