



TWELFTH INSTALLMENT

"We're modernists, Sandy," she said. "Every night is a night out as far as either of us is concerned. We're not playing the marriage game according to the old sentimental standards, not Tony and I."

Sandy's eyebrows came down, and his eyes narrowed. "In that case," he said, "we might have dinner together, tonight—I'd enjoy feeling like a husband-robber."

Ellen felt just a little icy, in-it was the first time since wedding that she'd actually made the break—that she'd put herself, married, in a position of accepting social favors from another man.

"Let's make it a real party," he said. "We'll dress, and I'll stop for you at your place in about an hour. I don't suppose, by any chance, that you'd have a cocktail waiting for me?"

"Marriage," she said, "hasn't changed my ideas about that, Sandy."

But she was all ready when he came for her in an hour (she met him at the door, he mustn't come up to her so obviously unchanged apartment!)

Sandy did it all very well! It was as if that evening he were planning to outdo himself—to make the party memorable. They rode in state to one of the larger hotels that boasted a dance orchestra and a roof garden.

They were shot, in the hotel elevator to the roof garden. They were shown to a table close beside the dance floor.

"It's a nice roof!" she told him—and tried valiantly not to tell herself that it would have been perfect if Tony had been the one to hold back her chair, to seat himself opposite her!

"I suppose," said Sandy, as he studied the menu, "that the boy friend is working, or something. Well, more power to him!"

And Ellen echoed. "More power to him," as she fiddled her hands tight beneath the damask table cloth, and let her eyes wander across the room. As her glance wandered from table to table, she felt her body stiffen. For there, directly across the dance floor, immaculate in dinner jacket, and with his blue eyes bluer than ever, sat Tony. Tony wasn't alone, either, for Jane in a wisp of devastatingly cut flame-colored chiffon, sat opposite him.

"Why," Ellen whispered, and her breath came in startled little gasps. "Why, there's Tony, now!"

It wasn't that her voice carried, it was that her thought carried! Tony looked up from across the room as

sharp as Sandy did from across the table. And then, without a word to the girl in flame color who sat opposite him, he was up out of his feet, was coming over the polished square of the dance floor.

"Say," he began, "this is a surprise!"

Sandy had risen, and was fingering the silkiness of his Vandyke beard. The gesture was sophisticated, perhaps, but the eyes above the beard were frankly apprehensive.

"So it is," said Sandy. He grinned nervously. "Just what does one do in a situation like this?" he asked. "It's all out of order!"

Ellen was laughing. She tried to make her laughter sound casual.

"One says, 'Hello,'" she said, "and 'goodby'."

Tony wasn't as brown as he had been when Ellen first saw him.

"You're all wrong, Ellen," he said. "At a time like this, parties join together! If you haven't ordered, come over to our table."

There wasn't anything else to do. Ellen, as gracefully as possible, and wishing that her dress were pink or blue or orchid or anything but white, rose from her seat, and was escorted by the two men back to the place where the girl in flame chiffon was sitting.

The waiter brought forward two extra chairs, laid two extra places on the table at which Tony and his guest had already started their dinner.

Then the music began. And Tony said, "Dance?"—looking at Ellen. But Ellen wasn't dancing with Tony tonight. Dancing with Tony always had a ruinous effect upon her.

"Sandy brought me," she said, "I'll have this one with him."

It wasn't a jolly evening. But it managed to be adequately conversational and very polite. No reference was made to the last evening that the four spent together.

And then, after the dinner had been drawn out as long as possible, it was time to go home! There wasn't anything else to do.

It was Sandy, not Tony, who decided the situation.

"I think, Jane," he said (they'd never gotten past the first name stage), "that it's up to me to take you home, even though I started the party with another gal! After all, you know, we're on the outside, looking in."

Jane bit her lip sharply. "I've got my car down stairs," she said, "I can take you all home you know."

And at last, after detailed directions had been given to the chauffeur, the car came to a stop in front of Ellen's house. The moment had arrived—and Tony rose to it nobly.

"Thanks, Jane," he said, as he helped Ellen out of the car. "You were nice to come to dinner with me—and nice to bring us home."

It would have been all right if Jane had left it that way—if she

had just said a gracious goodnight. For a moment one imagines that she meant to, and then she leaned out of the car and her slim, beautiful hand rested lightly upon the sleeve of Tony's coat.

"You'll not forget," she said, "that it's my birthday Saturday, and that the crowd is coming down to our country place for the weekend. You said you'd be there, you know."

Tony mumbled something. It sounded to Ellen like "I'll remember." And then he was starting to slam shut the door of the car. But his movement was arrested by Sandy's gay, tactless voice.

"Throwing a party," Sandy asked, "and not inviting me! How come, Ellen should have somebody along who talks her language. She'd be lost with all of you folks—who are Philistines."

Sandy, you see, was assuming—the other three, Jane and Ellen and Tony, realized it at the same horrible second—that Ellen was to be a member of the party! The birthday house party to which Jane had invited Tony—Tony evidently, to her mind, was still playing the role of a bachelor!

"Of course, you can come, Sandy," she said sweetly, "if you want to. It might be much more charming for Ellen to have one of her own—sort. Maybe you have the right idea, at that."

And then the car had gone flashing down the street.

For a moment there was silence before Ellen found words. Before she spoke in a voice that was shot through with bewilderment.

"And now," she said, "what are we going to do?"

Tony laughed boyishly. "I guess," he said, "that it's all set! It begins to look as if you're coming with me to a house party. Sandy certainly put Jane in an odd position, didn't he? But, as usual, she came through one hundred per cent."

"Yes," said Ellen, "yes, she did. Jane did come through. As usual." She spoke so softly that for all Tony knew she was sighing. He didn't know that all at once there was a seething anger in her heart.

"You're rather a peach, you know," she told Tony, and her tone was not all casual. "You've made everything very easy for me, tonight. But even though you're so regular even though you've been truly wonderful, I couldn't possibly accept Jane's invitation—I can't possibly accept Jane's invitation—I can't possibly go to her party. She was forced into asking me, you realize that. She doesn't want me—why should she want me? It's you she wants!"

Tony answered. "I'd like, Ellen," he said, answering the first part of her remark, "to make all of life very easy for you, if I could. That happens—"

his voice had also lost its casual note, "that happens to be the way I care about you." He paused. And then he was answering the last part of what she had said to him.

"But," he added, "I do wish awfully you'd come to Jane's party. She may have been forced into asking you—I'm honest enough to admit that she was—but the important thing is that she did ask you. Under the circumstances, if you don't go, I couldn't go either now. And if I don't appear on Jane's birthday, my crowd will think it's strange. And so—"

even through the dark Ellen was aware of his smile, "and so it would seem that we're in a box. Fortunately we're in the same box. Not—" the smile had grown into his carefree young laughter, "not that it isn't very nice to be in a box with you!"

Ellen was turning again; they were getting nowhere. She started to move wearily toward the steps of the house in which she lived. Tony followed her. They climbed the steps together, slowly.

"I don't know what to do, Tony," she said and her voice was vague. "Don't you think we'd better let it ride—all of this business about

Jane's party? Let's just wait and see what happens."

Tony was speaking: "Whether you go to Jane's or not," he said, and his tone was wistful, "I wish we might have a few evenings together. This has been sort of grand, hasn't it? To me it's been kind of crazy not seeing you since—" his voice lowered, "our wedding day."

For just one second—one second out of all life—Ellen dared to be eager. She did not draw her hand away, even though it was held so loosely.

"Sometimes," she said, "during the last two weeks I, too, felt that we were silly. I'd be glad to see you just as often as you want to see me, you know." She said the last with a rush. She tried not to emphasize the word, "just as often as you want to see me."

Tony answered very seriously. "That would be quite a lot," he said. "I guess we won't go into that, I guess you understand." He hesitated slightly. "Well, I guess it's goodnight."

Ellen was faltering there in the doorway. She took a step forward—Tony was very close, it was a short step. But despite his closeness, he couldn't know that she was near to yielding—to making crazy, sweet admissions.

"Won't you come up," she asked, "for just a minute?"

But Tony was moving away from her, down the steps. It seemed as if the distance was automatically widening between them.

"I'd like to," he said, "but I don't trust myself to come up with you. Unless—your invitation means more than I think it does. You must realize why I can't."

Ellen was fumbling with her latch key. She knew in her soul that she must open the door quickly, before she told Tony how much she wanted him to come in, how much she wanted him not to trust

himself. She couldn't make that move—she wouldn't. He wouldn't be given a chance to hurt her pride, or to break her heart. She must open the door, now—and go inside, alone.

In the morning Jane's letter came, as Ellen had known that it would. "My party," read the pseudo-original letter, "is going to be very informal. Just a few of my oldest and most intimate friends have been asked down. Of course, I do hope you can come and that you won't find it too dull—being among strangers."

As Ellen read the edged words, she was suddenly more bitterly annoyed than she had ever been in her life.

"I won't go," she was storming, "I won't! I won't! I won't!"

That resolution carried her through the first half of the day. Carried her along until Sandy's note arrived.

"I'm wondering," Sandy wrote, "if I can go up to Jane's party with you and Tony, on Saturday? Drive up with you, I mean. I've decided to accept the gal's invitation—it ought to be fun."

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