

Flasher

IN THE DARK

BY PAUL ELLERBE

THERE was nothing more to say. They had said everything over and over until they had beaten all meaning out of words. Words would come alive again when they reached the Langleys—alive and hurtful; but now they sat side by side and drove in silence through the rainy autumn night. Raymond and Sylvia Bent. In their twenties. Married a year and a half.

Raymond turned in at the gate, swung the car round the uphill curving driveway through the rhododendrons and stopped before the house. As the headlights touched the drawing-room windows they could see Quentin break off what he was saying to Iris and turn toward the hall where the light switch was. The light came on over the front door and the Bents went in, and with them wind, leaves from the Lombardy poplars, and a few drops of cold rain.

"We're separating," Sylvia said without greeting. She stood in the way of the door so that Quentin couldn't close it. She was white and concentratedly quiet, her soft young chin outthrust and her head tilted back in a way she had when she was moved. "We're washed up. We've quarreled and quarreled and quarreled, and now we're through." Raymond put his hand on her arm and moved her to one side and Quentin shut the door. "We wanted to tell you and Iris first of all."

She walked on into the drawing-room, and the men followed. Iris Langley stood as the sight of the two strained young faces had caught her, one hand stretched out to the back of a chair—a tall, dark, intelligent woman in purple and beige, a jade green scarf at her throat. She and her husband were ten or twelve years older than the other couple. People said of them that they had everything: position, money, brains, charm. Their happiness together was proverbial. Their house was twenty miles out in the country. The Bents lived in town.

The room swam with silence. Even the softly crackling fire on the hearth seemed to grow still, and the wind, that was buffeting things around outside. And then, "You can't!" Iris said. "You're young and terribly in love, with everything ahead of you! You just absolutely can't! It doesn't make sense."

She looked at her husband, but Quentin didn't say anything. He seemed a little stunned. He and Iris had cared an awful lot about these youngsters.

"I know," Sylvia said, her chin out, her voice pitched a little too high. "It looks like that. But you're wrong, Iris. The thing we just absolutely can't do is stay together any longer."

"We're tearing each other to pieces," Raymond said, "trying to make each other over! We're quitting decently and in time, that's all. Sylvia wants me to think and feel and behave just as she does; and I—"

"He wants the same thing of me!" Sylvia said, touched by it, infuriated by it, despairing about it. "He even wants me to think like a man!"

"We've tried and tried to stop it," Raymond said, almost gaunt-looking, though he was really rather plump, "and it's no use. People as possessive as that can't live together! They oughtn't to try to!"

"It's everything or nothing with us," Sylvia said. "We care too much!"

Iris had paled, as though the seriousness and sadness of this were coming home to her gradually; and again she looked at Quentin; and again he didn't speak. When there were important things to be said, it was usually he who talked for the two of them. Iris knew her own mind, and it was a good mind, but how often she had said: "You tell it, Quentin"—and Quentin would say what was in her mind more accurately than she could.

"It's harder when you do care like that," she said. "Love comes high sometimes. But—"

"Maybe you can't understand," Raymond said. "Maybe you never will. You and Quentin have got something so much bigger than most of us have. We thought we had it too, but—"

"You don't know what you've got!" Quentin said. "You're too young! In the midst of a world teetering on the edge of hell and damnation, you love each other deeply and truly, and you don't know what that means!" His voice had an odd shaken minor in it that wasn't there usually. "But you'll know when it's too late! You'll know after you've lost it! You may live to be an old man and an old woman and never have anything like this again. You may be married three times more apiece and never come in sight of it. You may be sorry for sixty years!"

"We're sorry enough," Sylvia said. "God knows we're sorry enough! It doesn't help any to be sorry!"

"It's everything or nothing with us," Sylvia said. "We care too much!"

Quentin opened his lips and closed them. He looked at his wife. She was shaken and pale, but she didn't say anything. Quentin Langley was a big, able, thoughtful man, the head of a good business which he had built up for himself. The sweat sprang out on his lip in the comfortable temperature of the room. He turned and walked off down the room, and turned and walked back.

"Some people, you know, can't separate." It was hard for him to say this; he was a man of many reserves. "I know you two as well as I know anyone, and I don't think you can—any more than," he said painfully, looking at her again, "Iris and I could."

He stood there staring at the younger ones, Sylvia in the quaint and exquisite little ruffled dress Raymond had selected for her and brought her here to be admired in such a short time ago.

"You can go away from each other. But it won't do you any good. You'll come back. And it will just be harder. You might as well settle it now."

"We've been doing nothing but try—" Raymond began.

"Who ever told you life was easy?" The words broke out of him. "Try some more! Go home and fight it through if you have to, reason it through if you can, but don't quit!"

"And destroy the very thing we're fighting for?"

"Real love can take it. You won't destroy it."

Raymond looked at him from a long way off. A vein had begun to throb at the corner of his eye.

"I tell you, we're destroying it now! I

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knew you wouldn't understand! How could you? But we had to tell you. You're our best friends. You've

been kind and patient and good to us—but you might as well live on Olympus or somewhere. Somehow or other you've had the breaks, and we—we haven't, that's all. You can say it's our fault if you want to, but you don't know. How could you know?" His face was bleak and settled, though the vein went on throbbing. "Talk's no good!" he said, looking suddenly boyish and forlorn and utterly hopeless. "Come on, Sylvia—"

"If I told you—" Quentin began in an odd, strained, humiliated tone, and looked at his wife.

Her paleness had left her. She was flushed with feeling. She nodded, and he went on.

"If I told you that we'd quarreled—" Quentin said. "Quarreled—you two who think you can't see it through!—so violently and bitterly that—"

"—that," Iris broke in in a voice that shook a little, "we packed our two cars and decided to go away from each other and—"

"—and stay away, God help us!" Quentin said. "If we told you that—" He stood there looking at them.

"Do you mean—recently?" Sylvia said. Raymond said: "What—what stopped you?"

Quentin walked to the rear of the room and clicked a flood of light into the backyard. Through the French windows they saw the garage with its doors open. Two cars stood in it with the lids of their luggage bins up and suitcases in both of them.

"You did," Quentin said.

Raymond and Sylvia stood side by side and stared, while the fire fluttered and the wind shouldered around outside.

Quentin laid his hand on Raymond's shoulder.

"Come on, kid, help me unpack. You and Sylvia are staying the night."

And Raymond followed him into the yard.



Illustrated by Charles Overman

A ONE-PAGE STORY OF MARRIED LIFE WITH A SURPRISING ENDING

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