

He entered, nearly filling the little passage with its drab walls of varnished paper.

"They are not very grand," the girl said, looking up at him.

She threw open a door to the right—the door of the front parlour. It was exactly what he expected, exactly what he had hoped for. The wanderer felt the years fall away from him, and he had a sense of home.

"I'll take these rooms," he said.

"Would it be for long let, sir?"—Her voice was timid and anxious.

"I can't say, but for several weeks, at any rate."

"I am glad, sir, I'll go and tell father."

She flitted away into the back-room, and John Barlas heard her soft voice mingled with a deep angry rumble.

The girl came back a little flushed. "Would you come in and see father, please?" she asked. "He's not able to get about, I am sorry."

The brown-faced man followed her into the back-room. Upon an arrangement which was obviously a couch by day and a bed by night, a bald-headed, bearded man was lying. Discontent and pain had gashed his face with deep wrinkles, the legs were twisted and useless.

"You want to take our rooms, sir?"

"I do. I think they'll suit me very well."

"Then you're easy satisfied. I wouldn't live here for five minutes if I had my way."

"Father!" the girl said.

"I know, Mary, that's not the way to let rooms.—What's your name?" he barked out, staring at John Barlas, who had begun to be interested by this strange personality.

"My name is Barlas. I've been out of England for many years. I was born in this town and I've come back to have a look at it. I'm Lancashire bred."

"Well, you look an honest man, and you're not a flighty young fellow. You can have the rooms,"—he flung it at Barlas as if he were conferring an immense favour. "Mary'll look after

you," he went on, "she's a good girl though not much to look at. She'll settle the terms with you. Good evening."

John Barlas got out of the stuffy room somehow or other, and rejoined the girl in the front parlour.

"You musn't mind him," she said tremulously. "He suffers terribly. Oh, I am glad, I am glad you've taken the rooms!"

"I am sure I shall like them very much," Barlas answered gently. "But why are you glad?"

"Father's taken a fancy to you, and that's everything."

Barlas smiled, he could not help it. "He shows it in a strange way," he said.

"But that's father. Time after time we've had lodgers inquiring, but father wouldn't have anything to do with them. And—and—he's only got a little pension from the Harrop's Mills where he got his hurt. I can't leave him and times are hard."

She was so simple and childlike that the lonely man's heart warmed to her. "Well," he said, "we'll see if times can't be made better. I will move in this evening."

At eight o'clock he drove up in a cab with one suit-case and a kit bag—having left the rest of his luggage at the Central Hotel. A fire was lit, a white cloth was on the round table under the gas jet in the centre of the room. The girl came in with the supper he had ordered.

"Father's asleep, sir," she said. "I've been and got him some stout, which always does him good."

"Then I'll be very quiet and won't wake him up."

"That will be good of you,"—she looked up in his face with a sort of mild surprise in her eyes. He saw that they were large, brown, and lustrous. He realized that this poor child had not met with much kindness on her way through the world.

Barlas sank into a curious, almost hypnotized state. He was placid, even happy. In his shabbiest clothes he