

He murmured some vague thanks as she turned abruptly, averting her head, and followed her up the little trodden path to the open door. It was a two-roomed cottage, with a tidy lean-to shed at the back, built for a kitchen. She slipped past to it, and he could hear her dragging the kettle across the stove, clinking cups and saucers.

Left to himself a moment, he looked about him with swift observant eyes. Everything in the room was very plain, very simple, spotlessly clean, whitewashed walls and bare floor and the scantiest of plain made furniture. There was one or two good pictures, oil sketches; some marginals in a bowl on a mantel shelf, near an old pewter jug. A row of books on a long shelf against the wall. A man's straw hat lay on a chair, frayed and shabby and burn by the sun, and he seemed to see intuitively the man who wore it. The room seemed to speak of him, its ascetic bareness, its uncompromising utility.

He moved to the book shelf, knowing in advance what books he would find there. The whole house laid bare its story to him frankly on entry, and the story of the wistful restless faced woman with the city voice. His gaze travelled along the titles, some familiar and some unfamiliar, and as he turned away again he caught sight of a small framed portrait, an engraving hung on the wall. His mouth curved curiously as he looked at it.

The girl came in from the kitchen carrying a teapot and some cups.

"There isn't any cake," she said. "I'm so sorry, but we don't have company often. And you can eat bread and butter, can't you? And there's fruit."

She was making little journeys to and from the kitchen while she talked.

"I knew it queer asking you in like this, but you don't mind, do you? And we're quite strangers, so it doesn't matter. One so seldom sees guests here, one likes to make the most of them!" She laughed, but he could read the nervous restlessness in her voice, the hunger born of monotony. "Won't you pull the chair up?—that's right. Do you take sugar? It's an age since I poured out tea for anyone."

There was almost a defiance in her friendliness, a reckless eagerness to make the most of this chance hour's companionship. She ate scarcely anything herself; all the time she was watching him, listening to him chatting in a quick detached way about one thing and another. Gradually there grew up for him in her face, her manner, something quaintly childish, infinitely pitiful. All the loneliness of her life spoke to him wistfully, tentatively, in this room with its unhomelike furnishing, its air of emptiness.

When he had finished she still kept pressing him to take more. His hand moved unthinkingly to his coat pocket, and she said at once: "Yes, do smoke, I do wish you would."

He lit his pipe.

"Do you live here all the year round?" he asked.

"Yes. Summer and winter."

"Not alone?"

She flushed very slightly. "My husband is away today. He's up in the City. Generally he is at home. I expect him back in a little while."

He looked round him again at the bare room, indecent in its silent avowal, at her, sitting there with her restless face, her work hardened hands, and risked all his psychological insight in one single cast.

"Why, dear girl, why did you do it?"

She laughed.

"Why? O, it's simple, isn't it?" she leaned back, her fingers gripping the chair edge. "It's all written out for you. You can just come in right here and read it. I suppose I did it because I was a fool—a fool—a fool! There! I guess you wonder at my sitting here saying it to you, but I've got to just that point I'd say it to anyone—just anyone at all that came along." The childishness went from her face. She rose, pushing her chair aside, and walked about the room.

"I guess I don't have to tell you anything, do I? I was young, and I didn't know anything, and it all sounded very nice and beautiful, and I wanted to try it. I thought it would work. A two-roomed cottage, some books and an acre of ground . . . well, I've found it out. Isn't it funny.