

Chapter 12

The Letting of the Room

It will be remembered that when the men separated, Owen going to the office to see Rushton, and the others on their several ways, Easton and Slyme went together.

During the day Easton had found an opportunity of speaking to him about the bedroom. Slyme was about to leave the place where he was at present lodging, and he told Easton that although he had almost decided on another place he would take a look at the room. At Easton's suggestion they arranged that Slyme was to accompany him home that night. As the former remarked, Slyme could come to see the place, and if he didn't like it as well as the other he was thinking of taking, there was no harm done.

Ruth had contrived to furnish the room. Some of the things she had obtained on credit from a second-hand furniture dealer. Exactly how she had managed, Easton did not know, but it was done.

'This is the house,' said Easton. As they passed through, the gate creaked loudly on its hinges and then closed of itself rather noisily.

Ruth had just been putting the child to sleep and she stood up as they came in, hastily fastening the bodice of her dress as she did so.

'I've brought a gentleman to see you,' said Easton.

Although she knew that he was looking out for someone for the room, Ruth had not expected him to bring anyone home in this sudden manner, and she could not help wishing that he had told her beforehand of his intention. It being Monday, she had been very busy all day and she was conscious that she was rather untidy in her appearance. Her long brown hair was twisted loosely into a coil behind her head. She blushed in an embarrassed way as the young man stared at her.

Easton introduced Slyme by name and they shook hands; and then at Ruth's suggestion Easton took a light to show him the room, and while they were gone Ruth hurriedly tidied her hair and dress.

When they came down again Slyme said he thought the room would suit him very well. What were the terms?

Did he wish to take the room only--just to lodge? inquired Ruth, or would he prefer to board as well?

Slyme intimated that he desired the latter arrangement.

In that case she thought twelve shillings a week would be fair. She believed that was about the usual amount. Of course that would include washing, and if his clothes needed a little mending she would do it for him.

Slyme expressed himself satisfied with these terms, which were as Ruth had said--about the usual ones. He would take the room, but he was not leaving his present lodgings until Saturday. It was therefore agreed that he was to bring his box on Saturday evening.

When he had gone, Easton and Ruth stood looking at each other in silence. Ever since this plan of letting the room first occurred to them they had been very anxious to accomplish it; and yet, now that it was done, they felt dissatisfied and unhappy, as if they had suddenly experienced some irreparable misfortune. In that moment they remembered nothing of the darker side of their life together. The hard times and the privations were far off and seemed insignificant beside the fact that this stranger was for the future to share their home. To Ruth especially it seemed that the happiness of the past twelve months had suddenly come to an end. She shrank with involuntary aversion and apprehension from the picture that rose before her of the future in which this intruder appeared the most prominent figure, dominating everything and interfering with every detail of their home life. Of course they had known all this before, but somehow it had never seemed so objectionable as it did now, and as Easton thought of it he was filled an unreasonable resentment against Slyme, as if the latter had forced himself upon them against their will.

'Damn him!' he thought. 'I wish I'd never brought him here at all!'

Ruth did not appear to him to be very happy about it either.

'Well?' he said at last. 'What do you think of him?'

'Oh, he'll be all right, I suppose.'

'For my part, I wish he wasn't coming,' Easton continued.

'That's just what I was thinking,' replied Ruth dejectedly. 'I don't like him at all. I seemed to turn against him directly he came in the door.'

'I've a good mind to back out of it, somehow, tomorrow,' exclaimed Easton after another silence. 'I could tell him we've unexpectedly got some friends coming to stay with us.'

'Yes,' said Ruth eagerly. 'It would be easy enough to make some excuse or other.'

As this way of escape presented itself she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her mind, but almost in the same instant she remembered the reasons which had at first led them to think of letting the room, and she added, disconsolately:

'It's foolish for us to go on like this, dear. We must let the room and it might just as well be him as anyone else. We must make the best of it, that's all.'

Easton stood with his back to the fire, staring gloomily at her.

'Yes, I suppose that's the right way to look at it,' he replied at length. 'If we can't stand it, we'll give up the house and take a couple of rooms, or a small flat--if we can get one.'

Ruth agreed, although neither alternative was very inviting. The unwelcome alteration in their circumstances was after all not altogether without its compensations, because from the moment of arriving at this decision their love for each other seemed to be renewed and intensified. They remembered with acute regret that hitherto they had not always fully appreciated the happiness of that exclusive companionship of which there now remained to them but one week more. For once the present was esteemed at its proper value, being invested with some of the glamour which almost always envelops the past.