

The Barrier Between

RICHARD MOORES

It was one o'clock in the afternoon, and the crowd in the restaurant was thinning. A dark-haired woman played on an elevated organ, and the waitresses walked wearily between the empty tables, collecting dishes and silverware. Big electric fans moved back and forth with sluggish precision, and stirred the rising cigarette smoke. The restaurant was slowly, almost imperceptibly, becoming enveloped in an atmosphere of languorous silence that would last until dinner-time.

Two young men sat facing each other across a linen-topped table, and a woman looked at them through the twisted iron grill-work that separated the two tables. The woman, sitting alone at her table, lighted a cigarette. She blew a thin stream of smoke between the lacy bars of the grill-work, and stared at the bright blond heads of the two young men. She looked at the tanned smoothness of their faces, at the slope of their broad shoulders, at the moving muscles in their arms. Her heart pounded painfully, and she felt a tender warmth spreading over her entire body.

The two young men talked about the war, about politics, about sex, about college, about girls. They talked about the trip they would take to South America, when the war was over and everything was all right again.

They got very excited talking about the trip to South America. The woman

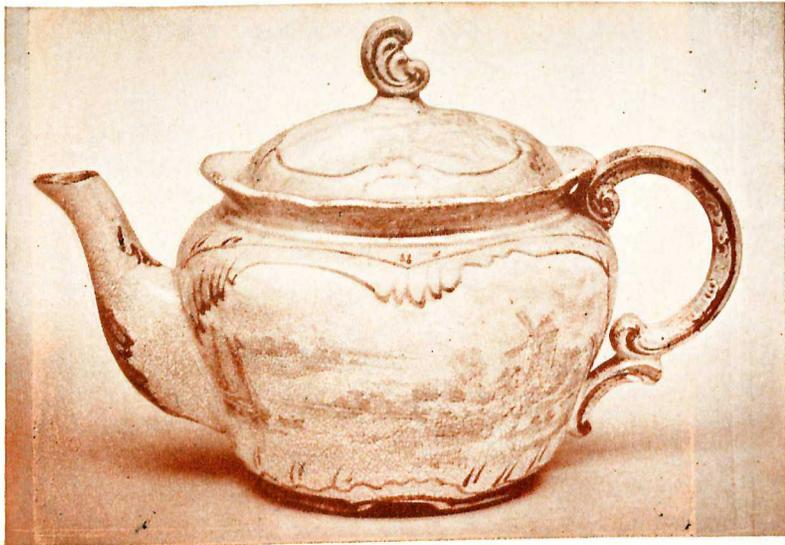
listened to the talk of the two young men, and she wanted to say something to them. She wanted them to notice her — she wanted to be a part of them and their talk. The young men suddenly stopped talking and lighted cigarettes. They were both eager and breathless, and their eyes shone with happiness. The woman ground her cigarette out in her plate, and lightly pushed the plate against the iron grill-work. The two men turned their bright heads at the noise, and looked at her with mild surprise. The woman smiled slightly and lowered her eyelids. She said, "You know, I've just been sitting here and admiring you two boys".

One of the young men laughed uneasily, and said, "I'm afraid there's not much to admire."

The woman said, "Oh, I think there's a great deal to admire." She made her smile wider, and her eyes were very bright. Both of the young men felt uncomfortable, and one of them looked at his wrist watch and said, "Good God, Jack, it's one thirty."

The other young man said, "We'd better leave."

Avoiding the eyes of the woman, they pushed back their chairs and picked up their checks. The woman looked at their bright heads and broad shoulders as they moved towards the cashier's desk. She felt a tear run down her carefully powdered cheek, and she reached across the table for her purse.



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